TO CAMILLE WHO MADE ME

AND MADE THESE STORIES

THAT I MADE

The Cow of The Barricades

and Other Stories

BY

RAJA RAO

'On all the roads I go, they suffer,
The hermit and the householder,
When I tell them the truth, they are angry,
And I cannot lie.'—KABIR

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FOREWORD

A name has a continuity, not our self. The Buddhists believe we jump from moment to moment and in between is the void beyond history. For, history is a concatenation of sparks on the void—someday like the serpent it must eat its tail and die too. Historically (and how long, long ago it was) I wrote these stories and I must own them. I own them.

RAJA RAO

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PUBLISHERS' NOTE

One of these stories—'A Client'—is translated from the Kannada, and all the rest, although first written in English, are translations too: through the medium of the English language the author seeks to communicate Indian modes of feeling and expression.

Three of the stories were first published in *Asia* ('Javni' in November 1933, 'Kanakapala' in September 1935, and 'The Cow of the Barricades' in August 1938), 'In Khandesh' was first published in *The Adelphi* in November 1934, 'Narsiga' in *Horizon* (Bombay) in 1944 and 'Companions' was broadcast from the Lucknow station of All India Radio in 1941 or 1942. The other three stories appear here for the first time in English, though French versions of 'The Little Gram Shop' appeared in *Vendredi* in 1937, of 'Akkayya' in *Cahiers du Sud* in December 1933, and of 'A Client' in the *Mercure de France* in August 1934. For this collected edition the author has made slight changes in all the stories. To the Editors of *Asia and the Americas*, *The Adelphi*, *Vendredi*, *Cahiers du Sud* and the *Mercure de France* the author and publishers express their grateful thanks for permission to reprint these stories in book form.

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JAVNI

Caste and caste and caste, you say,
What caste has he who knoweth God?

—KANAKADAS

I had just arrived. My sister sat by me, talking to me about a thousand things—about my health, my studies, my future, about Mysore, about. my younger sister—and I lay sipping the hot, hot coffee that seemed almost a nectar after a ten-mile cycle ride on one of those bare, dusty roads of Malkad. I half listened to her and half drowsed away, feeling comfort and freedom after nine wild months in a city. And when I finished my coffee, I asked my sister to go and get another cup; for I really felt like being alone, and also I wanted some more of that invigorating drink. When my sister was gone, I lay on the mat, flat on my face with my hands stretched at my sides. It seemed to me I was carried away by a flood of some sort, caressing, feathery and quiet. I slept. Suddenly, as if in a dream, I heard a door behind me creaking. But I did not move. The door did not open completely, and somebody seemed to be standing by the threshold afraid to come in. 'Perhaps a neighbour,' I said to myself vaguely, and in my drowsiness I muttered something, stretched out my hands, kicked my feet against the floor and slowly moved my head from one side to the other. The door creaked a little,

and the figure seemed to recede. 'Lost!' I said to myself. Perhaps I had sent a neighbour away. I was a little pained. But some deeper instinct told me that the figure was not gone. Outside the carts rumbled over the paved street, and some crows cawed across the roof. A few sunbeams stealing through the tiles fell upon my back. I felt happy.

Meanwhile my sister came in, bringing the coffee. 'Ramu,' she whispered, standing by me, 'Ramu, my child, are you awake or asleep?'

'Awake,' I said, turning my head toward the door, which creaked again and shut itself completely.

'Sita,' I whispered, 'there was somebody at the door.'

'When?' she demanded loudly.

'Now! Only a moment ago.'

She went to the door and, opening it, looked toward the street. After a while she smiled and called, 'Javni! You monkey! Why don't you come in? Who do you think is here, Javni? My brother—my brother.' She smiled broadly, and a few tears rolled down her cheeks.

'Really, Mother!' said a timid voice. 'Really! I wanted to come in. But, seeing Ramappa fast asleep, I thought I'd better wait out here.' She spoke the peasant Kannada, drawling the vowels interminably.

'So,' I said to myself, 'she already knows my name.'

'Come in!' commanded my sister.

Javni slowly approached the threshold, but still

stood outside, gazing as if I were a saint or the holy elephant.

'Don't be shy, come in,' commanded my sister again.

Javni entered and, walking as if in a temple, went and sat by a sack of rice.

My sister sat by me, proud and affectionate. I was everything to her—her strength and hope. She touched my head and said, 'Ramu, Javni is our new servant.' I turned toward Javni. She seemed to hide her face.

She was past forty, a little wrinkled beneath the lips and with strange, rapturous eyes. Her hair was turning white, her breasts were fallen and her bare, broad forehead showed pain and widowhood. 'Come near, Javni,' I said.

'No, Ramappa,' she whispered.

'No, come along,' I insisted. She came forward a few steps and sat by the pillar.

'Oh, come nearer, Javni, and see what a beautiful brother I have,' cried Sita.

I was not flattered. Only my big, taplike nose and my thick underlip seemed more monstrous than ever.

Javni crawled along till she was a few steps nearer.

'Oh! come nearer, you monkey,' cried my sister again.

Javni advanced a few feet more and, turning her face toward the floor, sat like a bride beside the bridegroom.

'He looks a prince, Javni!' cried my sister.

'A god!' mumbled Javni.

I laughed and drank my coffee.

'The whole town is mad about him,' whispered Javni.

'How do you know?' asked Sita.

'How! I have been standing at the market-place, the whole afternoon, to see when Ramappa would come. You told me he looked like a prince. You said he rode a bicycle. And, when I saw him come by the pipal tree where-the-fisherman-Kodi-hanged himself-the-other-day, I ran toward the town and I observed how people gazed and gazed at him. And they asked me who it was. "Of course, the Revenue Inspector's brother-in-law," I replied. "How beautiful he is!" said fat Nanjundah of the coconut shop. "How like a prince he is!" said the concubine Chowdy. "Oh, a very god!" said my neighbour, barber Venka's wife Kenchi.'

'Well, Ramu, so you see, the whole of Malkad is dazzled with your beauty,' interrupted my sister. 'Take care, my child. They say, in this town they practise magic, and I have heard many a beautiful boy has been killed by jealousy.'

I laughed.

'Don't laugh, Ramappa. With these very eyes, with these very two eyes, I have seen the ghosts of more than a hundred young men and women—all killed by magic, by magic, Ramappa,' assured Javni, for the first time looking toward me. 'My learned Ramappa,

Ramappa, never go out after sunset; for there are spirits of all sorts walking in the dark. Especially never once go by the canal after the cows are come home. It is a haunted place, Ramappa.'

'How do you know?' I asked, curious.

'How! With these very eyes, I have seen, Ramappa, with these very eyes. The potter's wife Rangi was unhappy. Poor thing! Poor thing! And one night she was so, so sad that she went and jumped into the canal. The other day, when I was coming home in the deadly dark with my little lamb, whom should I see but Rangi—Rangi in a white, white sari, her hair all floating. She stood in front of me. I shivered and wept. She ran and stood by a tree, yelling in a strange voice! "Away! Away!" I cried. Then suddenly I saw her standing on the bridge, and she jumped into the canal, moaning: "My girl is gone, my child is gone, and I am gone too!"'

My sister trembled. She had a horror of devils. 'Why don't you shut up, you donkey's widow, and not pour out all your Vedantic knowledge?'

'Pardon me, Mother, pardon me,' she begged.

'I have pardoned you again and again, and yet it is the same old story. Always the same *Ramayana*. Why don't you fall into the well like Rangi and turn devil?' My sister was furious.

Javni smiled and hid her face between her knees, timidly. 'How beautiful your brother is!' she murmured after a moment, ecstatic.

'Did I not say he was like a prince! Who knows

what incarnation of a god he may be? Who knows?' my sister whispered, patting me, proudly, religiously.

'Sita!' I replied, and touched her lap with tenderness.

'Without Javni I could never have lived in this damned place!' said my sister after a moment's silence.

'And without you, I could not have lived either, Mother!' Her voice was so calm and rich that she seemed to sing.

'In this damned place everything is so difficult,' cursed Sita. '*He* is always struggling with the collections. The villages are few, but placed at great distances from one another. Sometimes he has been away for more than a week, and I should have died of fright had not Javni been with me. And', she whispered, a little sadly, 'Javni, I am sure, understands my fears, my beliefs. Men, Ramu, can never understand us.'

'Why?' I asked.

'Why? I cannot say. You are too practical and too irreligious. To us everything is mysterious. Our gods are not your gods, your gods not our gods. It is a simple affair.' She seemed sadder still.

'But yet, I have always tried to understand you,' I managed to whisper.

'Of course, of course!' cried my sister rapturously.

'Mother,' muttered Javni trembling, 'Mother! will you permit me to say one thing?' She seemed to plead.

'Yes!' answered my sister.

'Ramappa, your sister loves you,' said Javni. 'She loves you as though you were her own child. Oh! I wish I had seen her two children! They must have been angels! Perhaps they are in Heaven now —in Heaven! Children go to Heaven! But, Ramappa, what I wanted to say was this. Your sister loves you, talks of you all the time, and says, "If my brother did not live, I should have died long ago".'

'How long have you been with Sita?' I asked Javni, trying to change the subject.

'How long? How long have I been with this family? What do I know? But let me see. The harvest was over and we were husking the grains when they came.'

'How did you happen to find her?' I asked my sister.

'Why, Ramappa,' cried Javni, proud for the first time, 'there is nobody who can work for a Revenue Inspector's family as I. You can go and ask everybody in the town, including every pariah if you like, and they will tell you, "Javni, she is good like a cow," and they will also add that there is no one who can serve a big man like the Revenue Inspector as Javni—as I.' She beat her breasts with satisfaction.

'So you are the most faithful among the servants here!' I added a little awkwardly.

'Of course!' she cried proudly, her hands folded upon her knees. 'Of course!'

'How many Revenue Inspectors have you served?'

'How many? Now let me see.' Here she counted upon her fingers, one by one, remembering them by how many children they had, what sort of wives they had, their caste, their native place, or even how good they had been in giving her two saris, a four-anna tip or a sack of rice.

'Javni,' I said, trying to be a little bit humorous, 'suppose I come here one day, say after ten or fifteen or twenty years, and I am not a Revenue Inspector, and I ask you to serve me. Will you or will you not?'

She looked perplexed, laughed and turned toward my sister for help.

'Answer him!' commanded my sister affectionately.

'But Ramappa,' she cried out, full of happiness, as if she had discovered a solution, 'you cannot but be a big man like our Master, the Revenue Inspector. With your learning and your beauty you cannot be anything else. And, when you come here, of course I will be your servant.'

'But if I am not a Revenue Inspector,' I insisted.

'You must be—you must be!' she cried, as if I were insulting myself.

'All right, I shall be a Revenue Inspector in order to have you,' I joked.

'As if it were not enough that I should bleed myself to death in being one,' added my brother-in-law, as he entered through the back door, dust-covered and breathless.

Javni got up and ran away as if in holy fear. It was the Master.

'She is a sweet thing,' I said to my sister.

'Almost a mother!' she added, and smiled.

In the byre Javni was talking to the calf.

My brother-in-law was out touring two or three days in the week. On these days Javni usually came to sleep at our house; for my sister had a terror of being alone. And, since it had become a habit, Javni came as usual even when I was there. One evening, I cannot remember why, we had dined early, and unrolling our beds, we lay down when it was hardly sunset. Javni came, peeped from the window and called in a whisper, 'Mother, Mother!'

'Come in, you monkey', answered my sister.

Javni opened the door and stepped in. She had a sheet in her hand, and, throwing it on the floor, she went straight into the byre where her food was usually kept. I could not bear that. Time and again I had quarrelled with my sister about it. But she would not argue it out. 'They are of the lower class, and you cannot ask them to sit and eat with you,' she would say.

'Of course!' I said. 'After all, why not? Are they not like us, like any of us? Only the other day you said you loved her as if she were your elder sister or mother.'

'Yes!' she grunted angrily. 'But affection does not ask you to be irreligious.'

'And what, pray, is being irreligious?' I continued, furious.

'Irreligious. Irreligious. Well, eating with a woman of a lower caste is irreligious. And, Ramu,' she cried desperately, 'I have enough of quarrelling all the time. In the name of our holy mother can't you leave me alone!' There, tears!

'You are inhuman, inhuman!' I spat, disgusted.

'Go and show your humanity!' she grumbled, and, hiding her face beneath the blanket, she wept harder.

I was really much too ashamed and too angry to stay in my bed. I got up and went into the byre. Javni sat in the dark, swallowing mouthfuls of rice that sounded like a cow chewing the cud. She thought I had come to go into the garden, but I remained beside her, leaning against the wall. She stopped eating, and looked deeply embarrassed.

'Javni,' I said tenderly.

'Ramappa!' she answered, confused.

'Why not light a lantern when you eat, Javni?'

'What use?' she replied, and began to chew the cud.

'But you cannot see what you are eating,' I explained.

'I cannot. But there is no necessity to see what you eat.' She laughed as if amused.

'But you must!' I was angry.

'No, Ramappa. I know where my rice is, and I can feel where the pickle is, and that is enough.'

Just at that moment, the cow threw a heapful of dung, which splashed across the cobbled floor.

'Suppose you come with me into the hall,' I cried. I knew I could never convince her.

'No, Ramappa. I am quite well here. I do not want to dirty the floor of the hall.'

'If it is dirty, I will clean it,' I cried, exasperated.

She was silent. In the darkness I saw the shadow of Javni near me, thrown by the faint starlight that came from the garden door. In the corner the cow was breathing hard, and the calf was nibbling at the wisps of hay. It was a terrible moment. The whole misery of the world seemed to be weighing all about and above me. And yet—and yet—the suffering—one seemed to laugh at it all.

'Javni,' I said affectionately,' 'do you eat at home like this?'

'Yes, Ramappa.' Her tone was sad.

'And why?'

'The oil is too expensive, Ramappa.'

'But surely you can buy it?' I continued.

'No, Ramappa. It costs an anna a bottle, and it lasts only a week.'

'But an anna is nothing,' I said.

'Nothing! Nothing!' She spoke as if frightened. 'Why, my learned Ramappa, it is what I earn in two days.'

'In two days!' I had never been more surprised.

'Yes, Ramappa, I earn one rupee each month.' She seemed content.

I heard an owl hoot somewhere, and far, far away, somewhere too far and too distant for my rude ears to hear, the world wept its silent suffering plaints. Had not the Lord said: 'Whenever there is misery

and ignorance, I come'? Oh, when will that day come, and when will the Conch of Knowledge blow?

I had nothing to say. My heart beat fast. And, closing my eyes, I sank into the primal flood, the moving fount of Being. Man, I love thee.

Javni sat and ate. The mechanical mastication of the rice seemed to represent her life, her whole existence.

'Javni,' I inquired, breaking the silence, 'what do you do with the one rupee?'

'I never take it,' she answered laughing.

'Why don't you take it, Javni?'

'Mother keeps it for me. Now and again she says I work well and adds an anna or two to my funds, and one day I shall have enough to buy a sari.'

'And the rest?' I asked.

'The rest? Why, I will buy something for my brother's child.'

'Is your brother poor, Javni?'

'No. But, Ramappa, I love the child.' She smiled.

'Suppose I asked you to give it to me?' I laughed, since I could not weep.

'Oh, you will never ask me, Ramappa, never. But, Ramappa, if you should, I would give it to you.' She laughed too, content and amused.

'You are a wonderful thing!' I murmured.

'At your feet, Ramappa!' She had finished eating, and she went into the bathroom to wash her hands.

I walked out into the garden and stood looking

at the sparkling heavens. There was companionship in their shining. The small and the great clustered together in the heart of the quiet blue. God knew their caste? Far away a cartman chanted forth:

> The night is dark;
> Come to me, mother.
> The night is quiet;
> Come to me, friend.

The winds sighed.

On the nights when Javni came to sleep with us, we gossiped a great deal about village affairs. She had always news to tell us. One day it would be about the postman Subba's wife, who had run away with the Mohammedan of the mango shop. On another day it would be about the miraculous cure of Sata Venkanna's wife, Kanthi, during her recent pilgrimage to the Biligiri temple. My sister always took an interest in those things, and Javni made it a point to find out everything about everybody. She gossiped the whole evening till we both fell asleep. My sister usually lay by the window, I near the door, and Javni at our feet. She slept on a bare wattle-mat, with a cotton sheet for a cover, and she seemed never to suffer from cold. On one of these nights when we were gossiping, I pleaded with Javni to tell me a little about her own life. At first she waved aside my idea; but, after a moment, when my sister howled at her, she accepted it, still rather unwillingly. I was all ears, but my sister was soon snoring comfortably.

Javni

Javni was born in the neighbouring village of Kotehalli, where her father cultivated the fields in the winter and washed clothes in the summer. Her mother had always work to do, since there were childbirths almost every day in one village or the other, and, being a hereditary midwife, she was always sent for. Javni had four sisters and two brothers, of whom only her brother Bhima remained. She loved her parents, and they loved her too; and, when she was eighteen, she was duly married to a boy whom they had chosen from Malkad. The boy was good and affectionate, and he never once beat her. He too was a washerman, and 'What do you think?' said Javni proudly, 'he washed clothes for the Maharaja, when he came here'.

'Really!' I exclaimed.

And she continued. Her husband was, as I have said, a good man, and he really cared for her. He never made her work too much, and he always cooked for her when she fell sick. One day, however, as the gods decided it, a snake bit him while he was washing clothes by the river, and, in spite of all the magic that the barber Subba applied, he died that very evening, crying to the last, 'Javni, Javni, my Javni'. (I should have expected her to weep here. But she continued without any exclamations or sighs.) Then came all the misfortunes one after the other, and yet she knew they were nothing, for, above all, she said, Goddess Talakamma moved and reigned.

Her husband belonged to a family of three brothers and two sisters. The elder brother was a wicked fellow, who played cards and got drunk two days out of three. The second was her husband, and the third was a haughty young fellow, who had already, it was known, made friends with the concubine Siddi, the former mistress of the priest Rangappa. He treated his wife as if she were a bullock and once he actually beat her till she was bleeding and unconscious. There were many children in the family, and since one of the sisters-in-law also lived in the same village, her children too came to play in the house. So Javni lived on happily, working at home as usual and doing her little to earn for the family funds.

She never knew, she said, how it all happened, but one day a policeman came, frightened everybody, and took away her elder brother-in-law for some reason that nobody understood. The women were all terrified, and everybody wept. The people in the town began to spit at them as they passed by, and left cattle to eat away all the crops in the fields to show their hatred and their revenge. Shame, poverty and quarrels, these followed one another. And because the elder brother-in-law was in prison and the younger with his mistress, the women at home made her life miserable. '"You dirty widow!" they would say and spit on me. I wept and sobbed and often wanted to go and fall into the river. But I knew Goddess Talakamma would be angry with me, and I stopped each time I wanted to kill myself. One

day, however, my elder sister-in-law became so impossible that I ran away from the house. I did not know to whom to go, since I knew nobody and my brother hated me—he always hated me. But anyway, Ramappa,' she said, 'anyway, a sister is a sister. You cannot deny that the same mother has suckled you both.'

'Of course not!' I said.

'But he never treated me as you treat your sister.'

'So, you are jealous, you ill-boding widow!' swore my sister, waking up. She always thought people hated or envied her.

'No, Mother, no,' Javni pleaded.

'Go on!' I said.

'I went to my brother,' she continued. 'As soon as his wife saw me, she swore and spat and took away her child that was playing on the verandah, saying it would be bewitched. After a moment my brother came out.

'"Why have you come?" he asked me.

'"I am without a home,'" I said.

'"You dirty widow, how can you find a house to live in, when you carry misfortune wherever you set your foot?"

'I simply wept.

'"Weep, weep!" he cried, "weep till your tears flood the Cauvery. But you will not get a morsel of rice from me. No, not a morsel!"

'"No," I said. "I do not want a morsel of rice.

I want only a palm-width of shelter to put myself under."

'He seemed less angry. He looked this side and that and roared: "Do you promise me not to quarrel?"

'"Yes!" I answered, still weeping.

'"Then, for the peace of the spirit of my father, I will give you the little hut by the garden door. You can sit, weep, eat, shit, die—do what you like there," he said. I trembled. In the meantime my sister-in-law came back. She frowned and thumped the floor, swearing at me and calling me a prostitute, a donkey, a witch. Ramappa, I never saw a woman like that. She makes my life a life of tears.'

'How?' I asked.

'How! I cannot say. It is ten years or twenty since I set foot in their house. And every day I wake up with "donkey's wife" or "prostitute" in my ears.'

'But you don't have anything to do with her?' I said.

'I don't. But the child sometimes comes to me because I love it and then my sister-in-law rushes out, roaring like a tigress, and says she will skin me to death if I touch the child again.'

'You should not touch it,' I said.

'Of course I would not if I had my own. But, Ramappa, that child loves me.'

'And why don't they want you to touch it?'

'Because they say I am a witch and an evil spirit.' She wept.

'Who says it?'

'They. Both of them say it. But still, Ramappa'—here she suddenly turned gay—'I always keep mangoes and cakes that Mother gives me and save them all for the child. So it runs away from its mother each time the door is open. It is such a sweet, sweet thing.' She was happy.

'How old is it?' I asked.

'Four.'

'Is that their only child?'

'No. They have four more—all grown up. One is already a boy as big as you.'

'And the others, do they love you?'

'No. They all hate me, they all hate me—except that child.'

'Why don't you adopt a child?'

'No, Ramappa. I have a lamb, and that is enough.'

'You have a lamb too!' I said, surprised.

'Yes, a lamb for the child to play with now, and, when the next Durga festival comes, I will offer it to Goddess Talakamma.'

'Offer it to the Goddess! Why, Javni? Why not let it live?'

'Don't speak sacrilege, Ramappa. I owe a lamb every three years to the Goddess.'

'And what does she give in return?'

'What! what!' She was angry. 'All! Everything! Should I live if that Goddess did not protect me? Would that child come to me if the Goddess did not help me? Would Mother be so good to me if the

Goddess did not bless me? Why, Ramappa, everything is hers. O Great Goddess Talakamma, give everybody good health and long life and all the joys! Protect me, Mother!' She was praying.

'What will she give me if I offer a lamb?' I asked.

'Everything, Ramappa. You will grow learned; you will become a big man; you will marry a rich wife. Ramappa,' she said, growing affectionate all of a sudden, 'I have already been praying for you. When Mother said she had a brother, I said to the Goddess, "Goddess, keep that boy strong and virtuous and give him all the eight joys of Heaven and earth".'

'Do you love me more or less than your brother's child?' I asked, to change the subject.

She was silent for a moment.

'You don't know?' I said.

'No, Ramappa. I have been thinking. I offer the lamb to the Goddess for the sake of the child. I have not offered a lamb for you. So how can I say whom I love more?'

'The child!' I said.

'No, no, I love you as much, Ramappa.'

'Will you adopt me?' No, I was not joking.

She broke into fits of laughter which woke up my sister.

'Oh, shut up!' cried Sita.

'Do you know Javni is going to adopt me?'

'Adopt you! Why does she not go and fall into the river?' she roared, and went to sleep again.

'If you adopt me, Javni, I will work for you and give you food to eat.'

'No, learned Ramappa. A Brahmin is not meant to work. You are the "chosen ones".'

Chosen ones, indeed! 'No, we are not!' I murmured.

'You are. You are. The sacred books are yours. The Vedas are yours. You are all, you are all, you are the twice-born. We are your servants, Ramappa—your slaves.'

'I am not a Brahmin,' I said half-jokingly, half-seriously.

'You are. You are. You want to make fun of me.'

'No, Javni, suppose you adopt me?'

She laughed again.

'If you do not adopt me, I shall die now and grow into a lamb in my next life and you will buy it. What will you do then?'

She did not say anything. It was too perplexing.

'Now,' I said, feeling sleepy, 'now, Javni, go to sleep and think again tomorrow morning whether you will adopt me or not.'

'Adopt you! You are a god, Ramappa, a god! And I cannot adopt you.'

I dozed away. Only in the stillness I heard Javni saying: 'Goddess, Great Goddess, as I vowed, I will offer thee my lamb. Protect the child, protect Mother, protect her brother, protect Master, O Goddess! Protect me!'

The Goddess stood silent, in the little temple by the Cauvery, amidst the whisper of the woods.

A July morning, two summers later. Our cart rumbled over the boulders of the street, and we were soon at the village square. Javni was running behind the cart, with tears rolling down her cheeks. For one full week I had seen her weeping all the time, all the time, dreading the day when we should leave her and she would see us no more. She was breathless. But she walked fast, keeping pace with the bullocks. I was with my sister in the back of the cart, and my brother-in-law sat in front, beside the cartman. My sister too was sad. In her heart she knew she was leaving a friend. Yes. Javni had been her friend, her only friend. Now and again they gazed at each other, and I could see Javni suddenly sobbing like a child.

'Mother, Mother,' she would say approaching the cart, 'don't forget me.'

'I will not. No, I assure you, I will not.'

Now my sister too was in tears.

'Even if she should, I will not,' I added. I myself should have wept had I not been so civilized.

When we touched the river, it was already broad morning. Now, in the summer, there was so little water that the ferry was not plying and we were going to wade through. The cartman said he would rest the bullocks for a moment, and I got out partly to breathe the fresh air and more to speak to Javni.

'Don't weep,' I said to her.

'Ramappa, how can I help but weep? Shall I ever see again a family of gods like yours? Mother was kind to me, kind like a veritable goddess. You were so, so good to me, and Master—.' Here she broke again into sobs.

'No, Javni. In contact with a heart like yours, who will not bloom into a god?'

But she simply wept. My words meant nothing to her. She was nervous, and she trembled over and over again. 'Mother, Mother,' she would say between her sobs, 'O Mother!'

The cartman asked me to get in. I got into the cart with a heavy heart. I was leaving a most wonderful soul. I was in. The cartman cried, 'Hoy, hoyee!'. And the bulls stepped into the river.

Till we were on the other bank, I could see Javni sitting on a rock and looking toward us. In my heart I seemed still to hear her sobs. A huge pipal rose behind her, and, across the blue waters of the river and the vast, vast sky above her, she seemed so small, so insignificant. And yet, she was one of them—much more at least, dear reader, than you and I.

THE LITTLE GRAM SHOP

EVERYBODY hated him, hated him. 'That swine of a bania,' they would say, spitting and thumping on the floor, 'that son of a prostitute, he'll soon eat mire and vomit blood. Oh! you son of a donkey!' They would spit again, draw a puff from the tip of the hookah and continue swearing and blustering. It was hardly a week since Ananda's family had moved to the Corner-house, and already he had heard a great deal about 'bania Motilal'. Narasimha, his class-fellow, hated him and had always curses upon his lips whenever he passed by Motilal's gram shop. One day, as Ananda was in no hurry, he slipped into Narasimha's house to have a little chat. Narasimha was furious. That bania had called him a dog, and had spat on him!

'Why?' asked Ananda, curious.

'Why? What will a dog do but bite?'

'I don't understand,' the other managed to mutter.

'You don't! Then you do not know the story?'

'No.'

'Then I'll tell you!' cried Narasimha triumphant, and this is what he told him.

That Motilal, the wretched bania, was poor as a cur—poor as a cur in a pariah street. A copper pot in his hand, with nothing to wear except the rags they had on them, he and his wife Beti Bai started from their little village in Gujarat, when? nobody knows, but it must have been some fifteen, twenty or forty years

ago. They tramped from village to village, singing and begging, eating the food they got, and knotting in the doles they received. And within a year or two they had actually managed to save a hundred rupees, yes, ten times ten, a hundred rupees. Now with that sum in hand, they had only to find a town to settle down in. His wife, poor Beti Bai, was terribly worn out by this errant life, and she swore she would go no further than Badepur. But Motilal was ambitious. What? A great-grandson of Bhata Tata Lal of Khodi to settle down in a dirty hole like Badepur! Never! It was true, misfortune on misfortune had pulled them down. But they had to rise up again. They had to become great and rich like Bhata Tata Lal of Khodi. It pleased Beti to be the wife of the great-grandson of so great a man. And she would do anything to be great like that famous ancestor of her husband. Herself poor—so poor that she drank water out of the street gutters, added Narasimha—herself poor, with a widowed mother who did manual work in a bania's house, Beti Bai had grown ambitious too with the stories that Motilal told her about his great-grandfather. 'What do you think,' he had assured her once, in the serai of Badepur when she was sick and unwilling to go any further, 'what do you think, Beti? Bhata Tata Lal had a house as big . . . no, about as big as this town. He had hundreds and hundreds of servants, and a byre that contained at least a thousand cattle. Oh! if only these dirty red men had not come, he would have been

rich, rich like the Maharaja of Bhavan. Beti, we too shall be rich like that . . . some day . . . one day. . . .'

'But you said,' objected Beti Bai, 'but you said it was your grandfather who wasted it all.'

'Yes, Beti. My grandfather had ten concubines and he squandered his property among them, among all the ten of them. And the little that remained, my father wasted it on his own mistresses.'

'And the red man . . .'

'Yes, the red man! Concubines and the red man. It is they together that plundered my great-grandfather's treasury. Oh! I wish I had been born then! To be born as I was, between cotton sacks on one side and the cattle on the other . . . in such poverty. . . . Oh! Beti! what a life for the great-grandson of Bhata Tata Lal of Khodi!'

He had tears in his eyes.

'No, no, do not weep, brother. As you say we will go far, far, as far as you like . . . to Hyderpur. You say there one can become rich in the twinkling of an eye. All right, I'll go with you, I will.'

'What an angel for a wife!' beamed Motilal, 'how wonderful! We shall go to Hyderpur and become rich in a day, fabulously rich in the twinkling of an eye. And when we go back to our town they will treat us like veritable gods. They will say "Look! look at them, sister, look at Bhata Motilal! His father died before he was born and his mother died but two months after he saw light, and yet look how rich he has become! The gods have helped him, surely. He

lived, sister, like a sacred bull of the street which wanders wild and eats what it finds. He lived by begging, and now he is rich, so rich." They will envy and fear me, Beti.' Beti could not help weeping. She was so happy.

'Yes! When we go and tell mother we are rich, how splendid it will be! She shall toil no more. And she shall live with us.'

'We shall see. . . .' Motilal looked towards the town, which was sinking away into the darkness. Here and there a light shone, and he lay down beside Beti and slept.

'So, after many, many months,' continued Narasimha, 'still begging and still wandering, sick or lame, they reached Hyderpur. They found that dirty hovel they now live in. It had neither roof nor walls. They went to the owner and asked him for an honest deal. He was but too happy to get rid of it. And with the necessary hagglings he was willing to part with it for—how much do you think?—fifty rupees, a damned pittance of fifty rupees. They bought it, and while they were trying to put up the wall, and lay the roof, they still sang and begged. Once a dog begins to eat filth,' said Narasimha contemptuously, 'you cannot ask him to stop. So, after a month's work—still begging—they were able to have a thatch over their heads. Then with the rest of the money they went and bought a few seers of gram and sugar and thus started their shop. Now, as everybody knows, they are overflowing with money, and yet

how they live, these dogs, these curs, they live like pariah's pigs . . .'

Ananda said nothing. He listened to the story with great interest; but to join the other in his anger was beyond his inmost feelings. He had just come to go to Motilal's shop. His step-mother wanted sugar for the evening dinner. Bidding an indifferent good-bye to Narasimha, he ran out. He ran to Motilal's gram shop.

The shop could not have changed much in its appearance since they had settled down there. The roof was of zinc sheets, with a few beams that had at least half a century of life. The only addition to the house was a little wooden byre that they had put up for the cow they had newly bought. The fodder was carefully piled upon the roof, and nobody seemed to remember if ever it had been pulled down these two years. The cow wandered all day from one dustbin to another, eating chips of vegetables that were thrown away, or, as it was rumoured, actually entered latrines and cleared them. Anyway she gave the seer of milk she had to, which with a little generosity under the tap became a seer and a half, and Beti Bai always had helpless clients to buy it. Ananda himself had once paid eight pice for a quarter of a seer—half water and half God knows what! But it was a good thing to have some sort of milk. If not, what shame! What would the guests think!

To come back to the shop itself; it consisted of a small verandah, some ten feet by fifteen, which opened directly on the road. In one corner was the grocery. Small drawers, some fifty or so, were fixed into the wall, each filled with pepper, ginger, or sesame seeds. Just by it, between four open boxes of rice, wheat, salt and tamarind, was an oily seat where Motilal usually sat. When people had to wait, they generally squatted down by one of the boxes and thus swept away the dust that had been gathering for some considerable time. On the other side, projected into the road, was a wooden platform—an old bedstead perhaps, with a few planks on either side—which contained the various grams in bamboo baskets. There was the sugared gram, the fried gram, the Bombay gram cakes, and occasionally perfumed gram balls, and sticks of sugar and almonds. It was Beti Bai who usually sat in the gram shop. She had made a duster out of an old cloth, and she kept off the flies by flicking it now here, now there. But, in spite of this, the dust that came from the road carefully settled down upon the grams. It did not matter much, as Beti once half seriously confessed to a friend from the bazaar; it added to the weight.

Behind Beti, by the kitchen door on the left, was a small platform on which lay almost all the things they possessed. A bed, always folded and carefully arranged, used to lie prominently on it. From the many holes in the carpet, one could easily guess what

the bedding may have contained. Perhaps a blanket, a sheet, and an old mattress, thin like the skin of a cow. Beside the bed were a few big vessels that were used for frying and baking the grams. Nobody had as yet seen where the safe was. There were rumours that they kept it in a hole in the earth, which was covered by the seat of Motilal in the grocery.

Between the gram platform and the platform where the bed lay was a narrow space that served now for eating, now for grinding and now for sleeping. It opened on the kitchen—a small tin shed that had protruded, much against the Municipal Inspector's warnings, into the little lane. One of these days, the Inspector was going to come again. But his servants were clever fellows. They had been given more than an anna's worth of grams some three or four times, and they had informed the boss that it was all perfectly in order. Well, if he came, if he actually came, a rupee or two in his hands and everything would go well. Motilal had known ten such inspectors, and had sweet well silenced them.

The one happy thing in the shop was the little green parrot in the cage, which cried out 'Ram, Ram' to all the clients who entered. Everybody who came in offered a few grams to her, and thus she had always more than enough to eat. Beti Bai loved her as though she were her own child. Especially since their son Chota had run away with that woman, they had found the little parrot to be their only solace.

She cost nothing, and was always so alive and affectionate. When Beti quarrelled with Motilal, which happened almost every day, she had only to turn to the parrot and call 'Mithu, Mithu', and little Mithu would reply, hopping round and stretching her feathers, 'Ram, Ram, Mai . . . Ram,' 'Pyari, Mithu,' 'Ram, Ram, Mai . . . Ram.'

Motilal must now have been over fifty. He was tall, thin, and rather wrinkled in the face. His steel-black eyes had something wanting in lustre. They seemed seated in their sockets like rats in a hole. And, too, like rats in a hole they were shrewd when you least observed them. His wiry hands, with bulging blue veins, shivered at every shake or touch. For ages asthma had kept him awake night after night, and but for his hookah, life would have been intolerable. The hookah was comforting for the moment. But in the long run, it had almost completely ruined his health. In spite of Beti Bai's constant quarrel about it, he smoked almost every minute of the day. In fact he had sometimes smoked so much that the very water of the hookah had begun to stink. But he coughed away, spat away, and smoked on, careless of all but the warm caress of the smoke in his throat. It was so delicious to have a friend like that. When he had to weigh things, he reluctantly put it aside for a moment. And no sooner had he finished his weighing than he would snatch it back with the eagerness of a miser, and begin his '*gud* . . . *gud* . . . *gud* . . .' It made such a queer gurgling

noise. Children who came to buy a few peppermints or sugar candy would usually sit and listen to the gurgle. And when they went out they would clap their hands, gurgle deeply in their throats and laugh. Behind them Motilal would still be at his hookah and it would still be gurgling, '*gud* . . . *gud* . . . *gud* . . .'

Nobody was sure what it was that had made Motilal so nervous and irritable. Some said it was Beti, but others insisted it was the hookah. Beti, of course, complained against the hookah, and had once got so disgusted and jealous of it that she thrust it behind the fuel in the kitchen and kept quiet as a stone. Motilal searched all over the place, and swore at every client in terrifying despair. But the clients could say nothing at all. They took their sugar, or their rice, and thanking the stars that for once he was less nauseating, they went their way. At last he could bear it no more. He thrust his fists at Beti and swore he would damn well skin her to death. But she smiled, sent a few prayers to the helpful Gods and feigned ignorance. He went here, went there, upset the whole house and still he could not find it. But there was still the kitchen. And in a moment he had discovered it. He jumped and swore and in a mighty fury he flung Beti to the ground and, clack-clack, beat her with a piece of firewood he had brought from the kitchen. She shrieked and she wept, her big breasts pressed to the floor, and her hair all scattered about. The clients who came could do

nothing. They stood in the shop silent and pitiful. Some who were more sensitive hid their eyes with their saris, unable to bear the sight of the blood flowing down Beti's back. Motilal still stood beside her, the·thorny stick in his hand.

After a moment's suspense, he went to his seat in the grocery, lit his hookah and attended to the clients. They were happy to have got out, and he the happier to have got rid of them. Everybody had gone and Beti still lay there, prostrate on the floor, and weeping. The blood that oozed from her back was trickling down and a few flies—it was summer—had already settled to their orgy. The dust in the street rose—and fell. Now it was a bullock cart, and another time a motor car. The sun was hot, iron-melting. It was Ananda who entered. 'Ram, Ram . . .,' cried the parrot. Smoking his hookah Motilal flared up at him. It was frightening to see him flare up like a lion.

'What do you want?' he growled in a hoarse, frenzied voice.

'Just a seer of sugar,' murmured Ananda, trembling. He looked towards Beti and it sent a shiver through his back.

'Bapuji . . . Bapuji . . . save me . . . save me!' she begged.

'Save you! Go to hell, you dirty dragon! Go and sell yourself in a house of prostitution, you wretch, you devil! You witch, you donkey's kid, you bloody . . .!' He growled like thunder. Beti breathed heavily and sobbed.

'What do you want . . . hukk . . . hukk,' he coughed, 'what do you want? Sugar?'

'Yes.'

'How much?'

'A seer.'

'Bapuji . . . Bapuji . . . save me . . . save me!'

Motilal leapt from his seat, and kicking her right happily on the back, banged her with the thorny piece of firewood.

'Ayyo . . . ayyo . . . ayyo . . . Mai, mother . . . ayyo . . . ooo,' she yelled, then rolled forward and writhed.

'Dog, whore, wench, devil, you witch! Shriek, shriek, as much as you like. Nobody will come to help you. No! Nobody . . .'

He grinned, wiped away his perspiration with his right arm, and drew a puff from his undenying hookah.

'Ha . . . Haa . . .', she breathed, and became unconscious.

Ananda was in tears. He wanted to run away. But he was afraid Motilal would catch him, and break his 32 teeth. He looked so enraged. He seemed ready to beat the whole world. Ananda shivered and stood, gazing unwillingly at the parrot.

Fortunately, the fear that she would die entered Motilal's head, and it horrified him. He went into the kitchen, brought a pailful of water, and sitting beside her threw a handful upon her face. Her mouth was wide open, and her tongue half visible. She was as red as the inside of a pumpkin. After

a moment she opened her eyes and smiled. He smiled back tenderly, compassionately. His hookah was with him . . .

In the evening when Ananda was coming back from school, Beti was sitting on the gram platform, whisking away the flies.

The morning was fresh as usual. For Beti and Motilal, days followed one another, and each day was as fresh and good as the other. They had got up as usual at five, and while she had gone to the street pipe to get a pailful of water, Motilal had dusted a part of the grocery and had seen to the folding of the bed. Then he went and removed the door planks one by one, tried to dust them too and laid them aside by the kitchen door. Beti had come back with water, and began to wash the vessels, in the street. They were not many. Just a few pots and the two bell-metal plates they ate in. She took a handful of sand from the street, and with a tuft of coconut fibre rubbed them till they shone like gold. Motilal, who had nothing to do for the moment, sat on the steps, his hookah in his hands. He had not slept very well the previous night, and his head was maddeningly heavy. He closed his eyes and sank into a quiet doze. People began to move about in the street, and the morning carts were rattling along. Beti Bai was thinking of her native village and she began to weep. Her mother was dead, and now there was nobody to go there for.

And even if she wished, would Motilal ever make such an expensive journey? Never. . . .

The first client woke Motilal. She had come for a quarter of a seer of rice. A quarter of a seer of rice! What a sinister thing to begin a day with!

'Nothing else?' he bawled, furious.

'Nothing else. Just a quarter of a seer of rice.'

'Oh! this world, this world! We'll soon die starving, with your damned quarter of a seer of rice! A quarter of a seer of rice . . . A quarter of a . . .'

'I must be going, Seth.'

'You want to go? Why, woman, you can go and drown in the next well! Or better still, go and lie with a licking male dog . . . Woman, you . . .'

'Very well,' she grunted, and walked away.

'I say . . . I say . . .' roared Motilal. To let go the first client . . . the first client, by God, and ruin the whole day . . . 'I say!!!'

The client walked away. She hastened along. Motilal ran swearing after her.

'I saaay . . . I saaay . . .'

The client shrugged her shoulders, and hurried on faster than ever.

'I say . . . ,' he cried gasping, and stood threateningly in front of her. She tried to slip away. But he caught her hands and held them fast. She shrieked. But there was not a soul to come to her rescue. And she ambled back helplessly, and grumbling, bought her quarter of a seer of rice. Motilal gave a broad smile. He was victorious.

'I am not going to let go my first client like that,' he muttered to himself.

'Then you had better learn to be more polite to them,' she suggested, with an indulgent smile. She was not so angry now. And perhaps if she was good to him, she would get a handful more.

'But a quarter of a seer of rice! Just imagine!' He coughed, and laughed disdainfully.

'Oh! I cannot buy any more, Seth. Don't you know my husband has run away with another woman, and I am poor?'

'Is it so?' he asked nervously. His son had done the same. This sadness turned into a strange pity. And, asking her to open her bag, he threw in a handful of rice. She was happy, so happy. And she walked away with many a blessing on the generous Motilal.

In the meanwhile, Beti Bai had finished washing the vessels, and had even come back from her daily bath beneath the public tap. She was muttering to herself the songs of Krishna, which she chanted every morning, doing her household work. The fire was to be lit, and the cow to be milked, and the milk boiled. All this before eight o'clock, when the customers would begin to come in numbers, one after the other. This morning, her fire too would not take well. It had been twice dead. What a bad sign to begin a day with, she said to herself, and she resolved to bear quietly any threats or beatings from Motilal. A bad day, for her, meant that. At last the fire slowly lit up, and, placing a pot of water on the oven she went to

milk the cow. The calf somehow had managed to slip away from its noose, and half the milk was gone. She banged the calf in fury, and thrusting it aside, beat the teats in the hope of getting even half a seer of milk. Fortunately there was a little left—in fact there was a great deal left—and driving the cow on to the street, she went back to the kitchen. The fire was but feebly burning, and the water was not warm. She cursed herself, cursed the fuel, cursed the calf, and blowing air into the oven, she sat thinking of all that might happen that unfortunate day—that dark day to be. Even a cough from Motilal would disturb her and send a shiver through her spine. But in a moment, as though to console her, the fire made the luck-bringing hiss. She was happy about it. So it was not going to be a bad day! The fire god had prophesied . . . Motilal entered. He too was happy.

'Beti,' he cried enthusiastically, 'do you know, a lizard fell upon my right shoulder!'

'Really!'

She had tears in her eyes.

'Yes! Just now. I was sitting in the grocery and it fell on my right shoulder and disappeared. I wonder what it will bring us!'

He drew two long puffs from his hookah and let them go into the air with a pouted mouth, like a child that is blowing bubbles.

'Perhaps Chota will come back,' murmured Beti, turning away toward the fire.

'Chota . . . Chota . . . You still dream of him!

I will not let him set his foot in this house. No! But really, Beti, I think we shall get something, something wonderful. Who knows? Perhaps the Nawab Sahib will accept my terms. Fifteen per cent interest. . . . it is nothing for a rich man like him.'

'Perhaps he will,' she muttered mechanically.

'He will,' he assured himself. 'Yesterday when I saw his secretary, he said he would see to it. You see, Beti, as I told you fifty rupees to the secretary and fifteen per cent interest. Imagine how much it will bring us, on twenty thousand rupees! We shall be rich, Beti!'

'What for? My mother is dead, and Chota . . .'

'Shut up, you donkey's child!' he cried, and walked away to the grocery, calculating again and again how much he would make out of this affair.

The morning slowly rolled along, and the afternoon too creaked heavily away, and yet nothing had happened. Every moment Motilal was expecting a servant from the Nawab Sahib or even the Nawab Sahib himself. Twice in the day he had counted his money, and put the twenty thousand rupees—all in thousand-rupee notes—aside. Every car that passed in the street looked like the Nawab Sahib's, and every client who came looked like a messenger from him. At lunch he did not eat at all. He said he was not hungry, and poor Beti was so sad to see him anxious. Her own heart was beating hard. She too was expecting something wonderful to happen. But what? Naturally, the idea of Chota coming back filled her

with strange happiness and fear. Oh! if he should come back! Oh! if he really should. He would go to Gujarat and marry Bapan Lal's daughter. She was meant for him, she was. Hardly had she seen the light of the sun, than she had been engaged to Chota, to her dear child Chota. It seemed the girl had now grown up into a charming little maid. And she was still meant for Chota. To have a daughter-in-law at home, how very fine, how good! Half the work in the house would be done by her, and then Beti would have but little to do. Yes! Chota would come back. He would! Chota! . . . Chota! . . . She wept. Motilal entered the kitchen to get some fire for his hookah and he asked her why she was in tears.

'I was afraid . . . I was afraid . . . ,' she blurted between her sobs, 'I was afraid you would die before me . . . '

'Poor thing!' he murmured caressing her hair, and went back to the grocery.

Now the sun was setting, and it being Saturday, Motilal had to go to Maruthi's temple. Usually he went in the afternoon, but today he had intended to take a larger present to the god on hearing of his success with the Nawab Sahib. And so he waited and waited. But now he had to go. If not, the door of the temple would be closed. And it was at least three miles away. So, sad and still expectant, he put on his old velvet coat, and placing his wiry turban upon his head, he stood yawning for

a moment, went and lighted his hookah, talked to the parrot, and yet . . . and yet . . . now there was no hope and he started. 'If the Nawab Sahib comes,' he ran back and told Beti, 'tell him I'll see him this very night if he likes.'

'All right,' she answered drily. The Nawab Sahib, always the same story. . . .

She was still dreaming of her son coming back and her good daughter-in-law to be, when the sun suddenly sank, and going in she lighted the shop lantern, and chanted her usual lighting-time prayers. She even lit the little oil lamp by the picture of Rama that hung in the kitchen. A little oil now, but perhaps it would bring luck. The gods after all are not so cruel. They might make you wait. But they will surely answer your prayers.

It was about eight o'clock. In a hour or so Motilal would be back. So Beti went into the kitchen and sat cooking. Somebody coughed outside. She turned round. It was just darkness, dense darkness, and not a sign of any living soul. But still the cough strangely disturbed her. How? She did not know. But it gave her some unnatural joy. She would have got up and gone to see who it was. But then, the person had surely gone. And the darkness was so heavy. . . . Unconsciously she dozed away. She was accustomed to it. Suddenly somebody seemed to call her in a familiar voice. 'Mai, mai . . . Mother . . . Mai. . . .' Before she opened her eyes Chota had embraced her. And they wept.

Motilal came back a little earlier than usual. Had the Nawab Sahib . . . ? He howled and blazed in fury. But he let Chota stay. After all he had come back. That was enough.

Mata Bapan Lal was happy that Chota had come back. So, in three weeks' time, he came down to Hyderpur to settle about the dowry. Motilal insisted on fifty thousand rupees. Chota was the great-grandson of Bhata Tata Lal of Khodi. But Bapan Lal had already married two daughters and had two more to marry. No, he could not pay that heavy sum. Anyway, as Beti was less ambitious and but too happy to have her son marry the daughter of Mata Bapan Lal—yes, of Mata Bapan Lal of Gorakhpur—she forced Motilal to accept only thirty thousand. So, it was all agreed, and the marriage took place with all pomp and generosity. The expenses were all met by Mata Bapan Lal and the bridegroom's party had everything they wanted. Beti had a three-hundred-rupees' Benares sari, Motilal a Calcutta dhoti, and there was actually a marriage procession with a bridal Rolls-Royce car, beginning at the corner of the Badé Bazaar and ending at the market square, by the clock tower. When Beti saw her son with a gold-laced turban, a filigree-worked achkan, garlanded from head to foot, and followed by thousands and thousands of people as the procession moved along amidst illumination and fireworks, she could not control her tears, and

repeated a thousand times to herself, that now she could die, happily, contentedly. And the daughter-in-law was such a sweet creature. She looked healthy and strong, and she would work so well.

A week later everything went on as usual. Only, each time Ananda—or in fact any customer—went into the shop, Beti repeated from beginning to end all about the clothes and clang and grand hospitality of marriage. In the meanwhile the young daughter-in-law—rather plump and big-breasted, with thick voluptuous lips and eyes that showed an iron will and unasking calm—the daughter-in-law would be grinding rice or wheat behind the gram platform. And Chota was hardly ever to be found in the shop. It was understood that he spent his whole day, except when he had to go and get provisions from the Central Grain Market, with his mistress in her cigarette shop beside the mosque. Whenever Beti wanted him, she sent her little daughter-in-law—they called her Rati—to the cigarette shop to fetch him. Only once Venku, Chota's mistress, had mocked at Rati and called her 'a village kid'. Otherwise they were on polite, indifferent terms. Chota's child through Venku sometimes came into the gram shop, to get something to eat from his grandmother, and Rati herself had often washed and fed him. But after a few months a strange jealousy broke in her. She was pregnant.

Now Motilal was really getting old. By next Dassera, he would be fifty-eight or sixty. And that

awful asthma had grown worse than ever. Night after night he had sat sleepless, smoking his hookah and waiting for the dawn to come, when it would suddenly grow less painful, and he would lie down to have a short nap. These sleepless nights had greatly weakened his already feeble nerves. He felt like beating everybody he saw, and lately there had actually been a boycott among his clients, because of his extreme irritability. They had all agreed—it was his rival Mohanlal of the little shop by the banyan who was behind it—they had all agreed that they would never go to him again. For three or four days, so few set foot in the shop that Beti, who had a vague idea about it, went to ask Ananda's step-mother and the short clerk's wife as to why they had become so cruel towards her. They did not hide the cause, and assuring them that she would see that her husband would lose his temper no more, she came back and scolded him. He coughed away and listened, and sat as furious as ever. The parrot's noise bothered him and the sight of his daughter-in-law was unbearable. Sometimes he closed his eyes, and sat telling himself that the whole world wanted to kill him. Once he had threatened Ananda with his hookah for having touched the rice before he gave it. But Ananda had come to have a strange affection for poor Beti, and he always went to buy things there. And there was one little secret that nobody knew except Ananda and Beti. On Saturday evenings, when Motilal was not there, Ananda always went into

the shop and Beti would give him a handful of salted grams with such trust and tenderness! 'That thing is an orphan,' she would say to herself, 'and I too have been an orphan.' And in her heart she felt Ananda liked her. They were secret friends. But Motilal was never to know of it. Never.

Of late the transactions of Motilal had extended not only throughout Hyderpur but even to the districts. He had many friends amongst the clerks and secretaries and their bosses always wanted money, more money. The District Collector of Sundarpur had taken a loan of ten thousand rupees to buy his new car and pay off a few old debts. The King's brother-in-law, who had just come of age to inherit his property, about which there was a lot of trouble, had borrowed twenty thousand rupees to pay his Bombay advocates. When he should win the case, which was sure, Motilal would get back the money, with twenty per cent interest. It was not known to many people, but it was a fact—there were documents to show it—that the great Prime Minister, having lost a great deal of money in a jute firm in Calcutta, had borrowed from him fifty, yes, five and zero, fifty thousand rupees at seventeen per cent interest. In a few months, that money with interest was to come back. There was but one sour unfortunate affair. A certain clerk, whom he had known for years had duped him. That scoundrel of a fellow had taken him to a man who wanted only two thousand rupees. Yes, only two thousand rupees. He was, Motilal was

told, a zamindar who owned many villages in Tikapur District. He lived in such a big house, with so many servants and cars, that Motilal was but too willing to lend the necessary amount. It was only for a short time. Six months at the most with twenty-two per cent. The agreement was duly registered, and Janki Ram—for that was the name of the man—thanked Motilal profusely for rescuing him from an old debtor. The next harvest would make him rich. But debtors are so cruel. They talked to everybody about your private affairs! A few weeks passed and somebody casually mentioned to Motilal the awful scandal of a fellow who had called himself Zamindar of Kotyapalli, and had suddenly disappeared from the city, leaving his cars unpaid for, his servants unpaid, his house rent unpaid. Hardly did Motilal hear that than he fell on the floor, shrieking like a child, and tearing his hair in utter despair. Beti ran to him, and the whole quarter came to see what they could do. But there was nothing to be done. Days passed. Sometimes he would suddenly cry out 'The Zamindar of Kotyapalli! Two thousand rupees at twenty-two per cent interest. Do you know him, brother?' Or in the middle of the night he would wake up and going out into the street he would shriek out, as loud as he could, that the house was on fire, that the two thousand rupees had come back with a hundred per cent interest. More often he sat in the grocery, weeping and laughing, muttering things to himself in strange and different voices. But

he was scrupulous as ever with his rice or salt, and weighed things exactly, nothing less, nothing more, just as though he were normal. He now stopped beating Beti and sometimes fondled her at unusual hours. He still hated Rati, but twice or thrice he suddenly embraced her and wept, crying what a sinner he was, what an old brute. But it was strange, very funny, as the short clerk's wife told her neighbour, that he, it seemed, never spoke a word to his son. Even if Chota stood in front of him, he would coolly turn away and smile at the parrot or a client.

After he had 'lost his head in the well', as the people in the quarter said, he had taken to the strange mania of collecting bits of paper that blew in the street. Torn envelopes, cigarette boxes, bits of newspaper and even dry banana and banyan leaves that looked like paper. He collected them carefully, and bringing them home he would place them in a corner and ask his wife to admire his riches. Day after day he went out, and sometimes he even left his customers standing, and ran after a rag of paper that rolled down the street with the rising winds. Sitting in his seat, he would often say to himself, 'I have paper. I have so much, so much paper. I am rich. If I should sell it I shall get money. Hé! hé! Money! Bank notes!' Or he would shriek out in the middle of his meals that the Zamindar of Kotyapalli had come and brought him twenty thousand rupees, actually twenty thousand rupees. 'How do you like

it, Beti? Hé?' 'Very well,' Beti would say, turning away her face. So that was what her husband had come to be.

One afternoon, while he was collecting his papers, a motor ran over him and he was instantly killed.

Beti got ten thousand rupees as damages and she was free.

Now that Motilal was dead, Chota had more responsibilities than before. He had to look to the accounts, go to people and dun them for payments, sign and register new transactions, and in addition he had his usual provisions to buy in the Central Grain Market twice a month. Very often he came back at nine or ten at night, tired and breathless, his head all covered with dust and his eyes pale and lustreless, and Rati would serve him his dinner that was always kept ready for him in the corner. Of course they rarely ever spoke to each other, and if they had anything to say, it was always communicated through gestures or short-worded statements, muttered as though to oneself. Beti sat by him when he ate and talked about that day's transactions. After dinner he would rest a moment and then go away to Venku, who had always a mouthful of curses to greet him with. He never gave her enough money and yet he would not let her go. That comic actor Mir Sahib was still asking her to come back to him, and Chota knew it was true. They had wrangles about Mir Sahib, who had once been actually found talking to her by the shop-

window. In his fury Chota had beaten her, and she had run away to the other, free as a dog. Chota swore and spat in terrible rage. But there was nothing to be done. She had gone. And that's that. He closed the shop and went home to eat. When Beti talked to him he flared up at her and asked her to mind her own business. Rati served. The soup was not hot, it was not . . . 'You daughter of a witch! You bloody whore!' He kicked her so badly on the stomach that she fell on the floor moaning. This was the second time he had kicked her like that, the first time being some months ago when she was pregnant, and the child had died of it. Anyway it was not so great an affair now. Neither operation, nor the police, to be feared. Rati soon recovered and everything went on as usual. Only when he went back to the cigarette shop, it was still closed. That wretched woman had not only run away herself, but had taken his own son. Sour concubine! He felt humiliated, torn. The devout and suffering eyes of Rati seemed so comforting. Why did he think of her? He did not know. He ran back and slept with Rati. She was so happy. She had never been so happy with him. But she knew he would be cold again—the following morning.

Poor Rati! Her life was such a dark affair. Born of rich parents, she had hardly known what it was to do any manual work. The prettiest among her sisters, she was the most loved in the family. Now her parents were dead, and her brother had never as much

as written a card to her. Here, a slave of Beti, a casual wife of a husband with a mistress, her existence was worse than anything she had ever heard or known in all her town. Of what use was all the money her husband had? What for? She had to patch her sari almost every week, and she wore silver bangles instead of the gold ones she had in childhood. There was nothing to hope for, nothing to ask. She had even hung a coconut in Maruthi's temple, with vows and prayers that her husband might turn kinder to her. But nothing had so far happened, nothing. Once or twice she had ideas of suicide, but it frightened her. To live alone like this was more comfortable. She bit her lips and determined she would live alone. One day her husband would turn back and come to her. If not, well, one has just to live . . . like Beti. . . .

For some years, the 'goddess', as they call the epidemic of plague, used to make annual visits to Hyderpur. October or November would announce her, and processions of corpses would go every day in the streets, till the hot sun of March would fight a battle with her and dethrone her for the moment. During the time the goddess reigned, half the city would be empty. The whole countryside would be filled with little bamboo huts, where people retired for fear of being the chosen ones. Only the medical men, the big sahibs with their spacious and clean bungalows, the banias and the crippled and the

starving would stay in their haunted homes. From the time the sun beamed forth in the morning till he speedily sank away by the evening, the whole town would be busy. They said the goddess could work only at night. The camps would be practically empty except for the mothers and the aged. Then, hardly would the dusk throw her torn blanket over the town than the street would be a desert again. The dogs too had lessened in number. Now and again, however, a car rushed past as though in holy fear that the goddess might peep through it even for a moment, or a crowd of people would be seen following a corpse with shrieking and hell-moving cries. Only the stars hung in the sky full of purity and strength. They alone seemed to know life was eternal.

There was another place where life was unchanging. It was the little gram shop. There everything went on as usual. And as many merchants had died in the city, so the prices had gone up and Beti naturally profited by it. One sold milk at eight pice a pau instead of at six. Even rice had increased in price. In one month they had earned one and a half times what they usually made in other seasons. Beti sat in her seat on the gram platform as though the goddess herself would be whisked away with her little fly-duster.

But it was not to be. The goddess had left them safe for two years, and now she was not going to leave them. One night Rati got a terrific fever.

Of course there was no doubt, it was plague. The next morning the municipal servant came and cleaned the house with tar and burned sulphur in the rat holes. At eleven the Municipal Inspector came and asked Beti to send her daughter-in-law to the Isolation Hospital. No, she would not go. Rati when asked began to weep. She would rather die in that house than in a hospital. The idea of the hospital horrified her. All that they did there, nobody knew. They cut you, pierced your flesh and did a million unholy things. Death were better. But by some strange power that Rati had developed, death seemed nothing to her. Not that it did not matter. But that it would not touch her. It would not. The will in her seemed stronger than any death. She knew she could not die. . . . But on the second day the fever increased. The bubo became bigger. And she was unconscious half of the time. But when she was awake she seemed so confident of her life that even the visiting doctor, who had been sent by the Plague Defence Committee, was struck by the fearlessness and confidence she showed. She had assured him she *would* not die. The goddess would not take her away.

It was the third day. Ananda, who had come to town to get some clothes from the deserted house, naturally went to see Beti and have his pice-worth of gram. Rati lay unconscious by the grocery, her eyes full of stagnant tears, her body stiff and uncovered, one hand upon her heaving breasts and the other

upon the floor, her mouth wide open, with a legion of buzzing flies, some that went in, some that flew around, and some that sat upon her palpitating nostrils, and amidst all this she moaned forth, raucous and breathless, 'Mother, mother, mai . . . Mai . . . My mother, mai . . .'

Need it be said, Rati died the fourth day towards dawn and was burnt that very afternoon. She was gone. Her will seemed brittle before the fire that consumed her. Death was the victor.

Years later, when Ananda came back from the north, he passed by his favourite gram shop. It was still so familiar to him. Only they said Beti had died a few months ago of old age, and it was Venku who sat on the gram platform. Buying the usual pice-worth of gram, he gave a few grains to the parrot, that had survived all. 'Mithu! Mithu!' 'Ram Ram . . . Babu Ram . . .' 'Pyari Mithu!' 'Ram Ram . . . Babu Ram. . . .' In the street the dust rose—and fell.

THE TRUE STORY OF KANAKAPALA, PROTECTOR OF GOLD

THE serpent is a friend or an enemy. If he is a friend, he lives with you, guarding your riches, protecting your health, and making you holy, and if he is an enemy, he slips through the kitchen gutter or through the granary tiles, or better still through the byre's eaves, and rushing towards you, he spreads his hood and *bhoos* and flings himself at you, and if he is a quarter-of-an-hour-one you die in a quarter of an hour, a three-fourths-of-an-hour-one, you die in three-fourths of an hour, and you may know it by the number of stripes he has on his hood, for one means a quarter of an hour, two half an hour, and three three-fourths, but beyond that you can never live; unless of course there is a barber in the village who is so learned in the mysteries of animal wisdom that he stands near, a jug of water in one hand and a cup of milk in the other, chanting strange things in strange voices with strange contortions of his face, and then Lord Naga slips through the gutter, tiles or eaves, exactly as he went out, and coming near the barber like a whining dog before its frenzied master, touches the wounded man at exactly the spot where he has injected his venom, and sucking back the poison, spits it into the milk-cup, and like a dog too, slowly

first, timidly, hushed, he creeps over the floor, and the further he goes the greater he takes strength, and when he is near the door, suddenly doubles his speed, and slips away—never to be seen again. The barber is paid three rupees, a shawl, and coconut with betel-leaves, and, for you, a happy life with your wife and children, not to speak of the studied care of an attentive mother-in-law, and the fitful grumblings of that widow of a sister who does not show even a wink of gratitude for all your kindness. But, never mind, for the important thing is that you are alive. May you live a thousand years!

But the story I'm going to tell you is the story of a serpent when he is a friend. It was recounted to me one monsoon evening last June, by Old Venkamma, Plantation Subbayya's sick mother. May those who read this, be beloved of Naga, King of Serpents, Destroyer of Ills.

Vision Rangappa, the first member of the family, belonged to Hosur near Mysore, and was of humble parents. His father and mother had died when he was hardly a boy of eighteen, and being left alone he accepted to be a pontifical Brahmin—the only job for one in his condition. People liked his simple nature, the deference of his movements, and the deep gravity of his voice; and whenever there were festivals or obsequies to be performed, they invited him to dinner. And when he had duly honoured them with his brahmanic presence, and partaken of

the holy meal, they gave him half an anna and a coconut, for his pontifical services. But nobody ever suspected that the money was never used, and that it went straight into a sacred copper pot, sealed with wax at the top, and with a slit in the lid. Six pies a week, or sometimes one anna a week, could become a large amount some day. For he secretly hoped that one auspicious morning he would leave this village and start toward Kashi, on pilgrimage. That was the reason why he had refused bride after bride, some beautiful as new-opened guavas, and others tender as April mangoes, and some too with dowries that could buy over a kingdom. 'No,' he would tell himself, 'not till I have seen the beautiful Kashi-Vishweshwara with my own eyes. Once I have had that vision, I will wed a holy wife and live among my children and children's children.' Thus resolved, every day he calculated how much money there would be in the holy pot—it would be a sin to open it!—and every day he said to himself that in one year, in nine months, six months, in three months, or maybe in two fortnights, he would leave this little village and start off on his great pilgrimage. And it so happened, that there was a sudden epidemic which swept across the whole country, and nearly every house had one or two that disappeared into the realm of Brahma. So, Hosakéré Rangappa—who was not yet Vision Rangappa—made nearly ten times the money in less than a month, and besides, as three rich families offered him a cow each in

honour of the departed spirits, he determined to them back and pour gold into the holy pot. 'What shall I do with these cattle?' he explained to the donors, 'I have neither field nor byre. I pray you, imagine you have given them to me, and pay me in return whatever gold you may think fit.' And they paid him in pies of copper, rupees of silver, and mohurs of gold, and he put the copper and the silver and the gold into the holy pot. He lifted it up. It weighed enormously. It weighed as though there was nothing but solid gold in it. He went into the village temple, fell prostrate before the gods, and having asked the blessings of the whole village—who offered him again half an anna each to honour him—he left the village under a propitious star, when the sun was touching the middle of the temple spire. He was happy, he was going to Kashi. He would bathe in the Ganges and have the supreme vision of Kashi-Vishweshwara. And then, purified of all sin, he would return home a holy man. They would receive him with conchs and trumpets, and with a gold-bordered parasol. . . . And as he walked along the road, all things seemed to wake up and weep that they too could not go along to Kashi. People passing in bullock carts—for there were no trains then—stopped and fell at his feet on seeing him clothed as one who goes to Kashi. They gave him rice and money, and some even gave him clothes. And thus Rangappa went from village to village, from town to town, towards the holy city of Kashi.

One day he arrived on the sparkling banks of the Hemavathy. He had his bath, did his evening meditation, and having drunk three handfuls of water, he went into the serai to sleep. And as he lay down he saw before him a bare, rocky hill, and the moonlight poured over it like a milk and butter libation. He was so overcome with fatigue that sleep crept gently over him. In the middle of the night he saw in his dream a beautiful vision. Kashi-Vishweshwara and his holy companion stood above his head, and spake thus: 'We have been touched by thy indestructible devotion, and we show ourselves unto thee that thou mayest be protected from the blisters of pilgrim ploddings and the pinches of the weary spirit. Thou art sanctified by our holy presence. Thy pilgrimage is over. But on the top of the hill before thee raise unto us a temple that we may sprout through the earth and live for ever amidst unfailing worship. Thy duty is to look after the temple, and generation after generation of thy family will be beloved of us. May our blessings be on thee.' And the Holy Couple were lost through a choir of clouds.

The next morning when Rangappa had duly taken his bath in the river and had said his prayers, he went up the hill, feeling purified and exalted. On a rock at the very top, he saw the figure of Shiva as *linga* and Parvathi with her holy tress and crown, as though carved but yesternight, and yet how old, and shapeful and serene. He sat beside the *Udbhava-*

murti,[1] and meditated for twenty-one days without food, fruit or water. A shepherd boy discovered him, and rushing to the town cried out from end to end of the streets that a holy man had sat himself on the top of the hill in rapt meditation. People came with fruits and flowers and with many sweetly perfumed preparations of rice, pulses and flour, and placing them before him, begged of him to honour the humble ones with his blessings. He spake unto them of his vision, and each one hurried down the hill and ran up back to the summit, bringing copper plates and silver plates and golden plates, and placed them before him. He touched the offerings, and asked them to build the temple. Four walls of stone rose above the rock before the sun had set, and Hoskéré Rangappa—now become Vision Rangappa—sanctified the temple with hymns from the *Atharva-veda*. And the holy pot stood by the Holy Couple. It belonged to them.

The whole town rejoiced that Kashi-Vishweshwara and his Divine Companion had honoured their poor Subbéhalli with their permanent presence. They gave dinners and organized processions, and called their village Kashipura. Vision Rangappa married the third daughter of Pandit Sivaramayya, and settled down in the village. And for fear the armies of the red man, which were battling with the Sultan of Mysore, should rob them of the money-pot, he brought it

[1] A stone rising out of the ground, carved with images of the gods.

home and, digging a hole beneath the family sanctum, put it there and covered it over with mud and stone.

The next day, a huge three-striped cobra, with eyes like sapphire, and the jewel in the hood, lay curled upon the spot, for the cobra is the eternal guardian of sacred gold. And they called him Kanakapala—protector of gold.

Over a hundred years have now passed, and things have changed in Kashipura as all over the world. People have grown from boys to young men, from young men to men with children, and then to aged grandfathers, and some too have left for the woods to meditate, and others have died a common death, surrounded by wife and children, and children's children. Others have become rich, after having begged in the streets; while some have become villains, though they were once the meekest of the meek. And some—Shiva forgive them!—are lying eaten by disease though they were strong as bulls and pious as dedicated cows. Those who have become rich have children, those who have become wicked have children, and those who have become sick may have had children too, and after a hundred years, their children's children are living to still see the Hemavathy hurl herself against the elephant-headed rock, and churning round the Harihara hills—just beneath the temple—leap forth into the breathful valleys, amidst gardens of mango and coconut, rice and sugar-cane. Three times, they say, the

Goddess Hemavathy has grown so furious with the sins of her children, that she rose in tempestuous rage, and swelling like a demon, swept away the trees, the crops, and the cattle—leaving behind sands where there was soil fine as powder of gold, and rock and stone where the mangoes stretched down as though to rest themselves on the soft green earth below. Coconut trees too were uprooted, and at least three houses were washed away, roofs and all. . . . but that was some fifteen years ago—the last flood. Since then nothing very important has happened in Kashipura, unless of course you count among big events, the untimely death of the old eight-verandahed-house Chowdayya, the third marriage of the old widower Cardamom-field Venkatesha, the sale of Tippayya's mango garden, the elopement of Sidda's daughter, Kenchi, with the Revenue Inspector's servant. But—and here, as Old Venkamma told me the story, she grew more and more animated—'the biggest event without doubt is the one I am going to tell you about, of how the Vision-House brothers, Surappa the elder, and Ranganna the third—pushed, as they say, though nobody knows the entire truth to this day—pushed their second brother Seetharamu into the river—you know why? . . . to have gold. . . to have the gold of Kanakapala. Nobody speaks loudly of it, but who does not know they have drowned him? You had only to see, how of late Kanakapala, who even when you accidentally put your foot on him lay quiet as

a lamb, now spreads his hood, as soon as he espies you, and was even heard to pursue the carpenter Ranga to the door. After all, my son, if Kanakapala did not know of it, who else could have discovered it, tell me? Of course I do not know the story. But this is what they say. Now listen!

'You know, in the Vision-House, since the good old father Ramakrishnayya died, they had been trying to murder one another. Oh! to have had a father with a heart pure as the morning lotus, so pious, so generous, and venerable as a saint, that such a father should have children like this! Shiva, Shiva, bestow unto us Thy light! Well, after all, my son, who can save us from our karma? It was perhaps his karma to see his children turn base as pariahs, and quarrel like street-dogs. Of course as long as he lived, they never fought openly. They beat each other in the garden, or when the father had gone to the temple; and when they saw Ramakrishnayya they suddenly changed into calves, so mild, so soft, and so deferent. Once he caught Surappa the elder, and Ranganna the third—the same who were to commit the horrid deed—he caught them pulling the branch of the champak tree, when Seetharamu had gone up to pluck flowers for the morning worship. "What are you up to?" Ramakrishnayya cried. "Nothing! Nothing!" they answered, and stood trembling before him. "We are just going to play Hopping-monkey." "Hopping-monkey! Why not have four more children, you pariahs, before playing Hopping-

monkey!" For, you must remember, at that time Surappa was twenty-six, married and had already two children, and Rangappa had just come back after his nuptials. Seetharamu had lost his wife in that horrible fever, and was just intending to marry again. That happened when our little Ramu was going through his initiation ceremony—that is, some four years to next Dassera. Since that day, the father is supposed to have taken great care of Seetharamu, for he loved him the most—learned and obedient and respectful as he was—and he often took him to the temple, lest the worst happen at home. Good Ranganayakamma, Ramakrishnayya's sister, was pretty old, and had for long been blind, and nobody would listen to her now. Of course, there was Sata, the widowed daughter, who could easily have taken care of Seetharamu. But, she herself, as every woman in this village knows, was greedy, malicious, and clever as a jackal. They even said she had poisoned her husband because he was too old for her, and take my word, she was malignant minx enough to do it. Anyway, since she came back home, she has been more with Seenappa, and Ranganna, than with Seetharamu. I wonder if everybody believes in it. Never, however, speak of it to anyone, my child, will you? But everybody says, the very first day she came home, she discovered how things went there, and tried to poison Seetharamu. She even did poison him, they say, for, if you remember, he fell seriously sick soon after her arrival,

and vomited nothing but blood—red blood, black blood and violet blood; and it was during that same week too we saw Kanakapala furious for the first time, and lying near Seetharamu's bed, to guard him from further harm. How he lay there, quiet and awake, eyes shining like jewels, and the old, old skin dandruff-covered and parched, shrivelled like the cast-off skin of a plantain. Somehow Kanakapala had a particular love for Seetharamu. When he was born Kanakapala slowly slipped into the room, and stealing into the cradle, spread his hood over the child, and disappeared with the swiftness of lightning. No wonder Seetharamu was such a godlike boy. He must have been one of the chosen ones. He was always so smiling, so serene, so full of respect and affection. Why, if I had a daughter to marry, I would have given her away to him! Anyway, he married a good girl, and it is unfortunate she died before bearing him a child. It *is* so unfortunate. . . .

'However, to come back to the story. Surappa and Ranganna wanted somehow to kill Seetharamu, because they knew he would never think of digging out that gold their ancestors had offered to the gods. By the way, my son, do you know what they say about it? First, it was under the sanctum. Then it moved—under the earth, of course!—to the dining room, then later to the granary, and lastly it was under the lumber-room by the kitchen. Not that anyone knows about it, for sure. But wherever the serpent sleeps is *the* spot. If not, why should

Kanakapala change place so often? And why does he not sleep always in the same place, once he has chosen his abode? Gold, you know, moves about from place to place lest the wicked find it. Only the holy ones can touch it. Seetharamu alone could go to the lumber-room, for Kanakapala knew the true from the false, as the rat knows the grain from the husk. Once, it was said, Surappa actually entered the lumber-room when Kanakapala was being fed with milk by Sata, and somehow—for the snakes have understanding where we human beings do not have—he knew of it, and spitting back the milk into the cup rushed to the spot, and having spread his hood hissed and bellowed and bit Surappa, without of course injecting any venom, for being of the temple it can never sting a Vision-House man. He yelled and ran into the kitchen. "What is it?" cried Seetharamu, running to his brother's rescue.

'"Nothing, nothing at all. When I was passing by the lumber-room, Kanakapala pursued me, though I'd done nothing. Perhaps he was just chasing his prey . . ."

'Seetharamu hurried to the lumber-room, scolded Kanakapala angrily; and the poor fellow lay there quiet, curled and flat, and with wide-open eyes. He seemed tame as a dog. Since then Kanakapala never pursued anybody. Somehow Seetharamu seemed to have commanded him not to. Oh! that he should have faith in these people! But, my son, who can ever imagine that your own brothers are going to

murder you so that they may have the money—and holy money too!—holy money that your grandfathers have offered to the gods? . . . Well, but the world is changing. We are living in Kali Yuga. And don't they say, for every million virtuous men there were in the first Yuga, every thousand in the second, every hundred in the third, there is but one now? Unrighteousness becomes the master, and virtue is being trodden down. Oh, when our grandfathers were alive, how happily we lived. We bought a khanda of rice for half a rupee, and seven seers of ghee for a rupee. And now. . . . And now. . . . You must beat your mouth and yell. . . . Oh, to live in this poor, polluted world. . . .

'Anyway Ramakrishnayya died. You know Kanakapala lay by his corpse till they took him away. And when they had lifted up the corpse, Kanakapala spat out poison once, twice, thrice. . . . That was how he showed his grief. And he never touched milk for three full days. Poor Kanakapala!

'A week later the three brothers had begun to quarrel about the division of property. Each one said—though it is impossible to believe that Seetharamu could have said it—that he wanted the mango garden. They could not agree over it. First it was Surappa and Ranganna that had growled at each other. And when Seetharamu simply said: "Why quarrel over such small things?" they both fell upon him—it must surely have been planned out—and beat him on the stomach and on the back. The old blind aunt

went into the kitchen, and Sata ran about the house, pretending to cry and sob. That widow to sob! If she had a lover in her bed, she would not sob, hé? And nobody came to separate the fighting brothers. It was Kanakapala, who, strange to say, suddenly appeared and, slipping between the two aggressors and Seetharamu, tried to separate them. But when they continued he roped himself round the foot of Surappa who staggered and fell. Then Kanakapala frightened Ranganna with his spread hood, and Ranganna ran out breathlessly. . . . And Seetharamu lay on the floor, quiet, blank-eyed, and with no evil in his heart, while Kanakapala gently moved his tail about his face in friendly caress.

'That was as you know the last quarrel they had at home. It was hardly a fortnight later that Seetharamu's body was discovered in the Hemavathy. As to how it happened, everybody has his own opinion about it. My own is slightly different from that of others, because being their neighbour, and third cousin, I have more reasons to know these things than most people. Besides, I am an old woman, and I have seen so many domestic calamities that I can quite surmise how this could have happened too. Listen.

'Now, you will perhaps call me wicked, maybe I am wicked. But tell me, how else can one explain the sudden death of Seetharamu if not by realizing that his two brothers hated him and, wanting the gold, drowned him in the river? Of course, people

will tell you they were both lying sick at home, and nobody knows how Seetharamu, who went to Kanthapura to look after the peasants that were going to sow rice, should suddenly have disappeared. There is the boatman, Sidda. You know how at least two murders—of Dasappa of the oil-shop, and Sundrappa of the stream-fed-field—in both of them he was implicated. You know too how he beats his wife, and no child will ever approach him. Now, Sidda was to ply Seetharamu across the river, for the field lay on the Kanthapura side, and he says he never saw Seetharamu. If he had not seen Seetharamu, who else could have seen him, tell me? I myself saw Seetharamu passing by our door. And when I asked him where he was going, he told me definitely that he was going to Kanthapura to look after the sowings, as the two brothers were sick. Sick! I know what that sickness was! They looked hale and strong as exhibition bulls. They must simply have starved themselves to bear a pale face two days later. The evening before they were quite well, and if Big-House Subbayya is to be believed, they were talking to Sidda, a long, long time. The case is plain. Sidda pushed Seetharamu into the river. Any honest person in the village will believe it. But they are afraid of the Vision-House people. Besides they want to have nothing to do with the police. And who does not know the Police Inspector has been duly bribed by them? I have myself seen the Police Inspector, a fat, vicious, green-looking brute, staying

day after day in the Vision-House. . . . But nobody will accept it. Maybe I am wicked. May God forgive me for my tongue! But, if I had no children, I will tell you what I would do, my son: I would poison these two brothers, and, drinking half a seer of warm milk with undisturbed contentment, I would go and drown myself in the river, happy . . . very happy.

'Poor Seetharamu!

'After that the story is simple. One day when Sata kept feeding Kanakapala in the kitchen, the two brothers closed the sanctum door and began to dig. Kanakapala swung out and hurled his head against the door, hissing and rasping. But there was no answer. Furious he ran to the roof, and slipped into the eaves, but every chink and hole had been closed with cloth and coconut rind. He rushed back to the kitchen again but there was no one. He ran to the byre, spitting venom at every breath. . . . and there was no one. Then, frantic, helpless, repentant, he rushed out of the door and scampered up the hill. Entering the temple, he went round and round the god and goddess, once, twice, thrice, and curling himself at the foot of the Divine Couple, swallowed his tail, and died. For is it not said, a snake loves death better than an undutiful life?

'The Vision-House people never found the gold. But with what libations have they now to wash away their sins. Child after child, new-born child, new-lisping child, new-walking child, young child, old

child, school-going child, have met with mysterious, untimely deaths. And no woman in their family can ever bear a child for nine months and bring it forth, for the malediction of Naga is upon them. Never, never till seven times are they dead, and seven times are they reborn, can they wear out their sacrilegious act. . . . Oh, sinners, sinners!

'And to this day there is not a woman, child or man in Kashipura that has not heard the money clinking in the earth, for holy gold moves from place to place, lest the wicked find it. And that same night Kanakapala appears in the dream of woman, child or man, frantic, helpless, repentant, and scampering up the hill, goes round the god and goddess, once, twice, thrice, and curling himself at the foot of the Divine Couple, swallows his tail—and dies.'

I too have dreamt of it, believe me — or else I wouldn't have written this story.

AKKAYYA

I, nor do I think any of my cousins, never knew what she was actually called. Everybody in the family called her Akkayya, elder sister, and we simply followed the example of our parents and aunts. I have, nevertheless, a faint remembrance that when they were talking to the Brahmins about the obsequies, they called her Venkatalakshamma, Subbamma or Nanjamma, one of those old names which meant all that a virtuous woman ought to have, that is, *virtue*.

My first vivid impressions of Akkayya go back to my childhood. I must have been about four; and having just lost my mother, I was left under her care, till my father married again and started his new family. I used to be very devoted to Akkayya, and had a strange, instinctive pity for her. She must have been over sixty, and I always saw her with the same child-like smile, with eyes that moved like the marbles I played with, and her face all wrinkled like a dry mango, more wrinkled than ever when she smiled. When the summer sun abruptly disappeared and a starry night spread above us, I used to be seated on her lap, in the verandah of the Fig-tree House. The evening I remember so well, she sat looking toward the town, where the lights were being lit in houses and in shops; and all of a sudden she turned toward me and kissed me. She spoke very little, but when she did she lisped like a child.

'Ta-ta-ta, Ma-mama,' she whispered to me, 'Tatatta, mamamma, you are a sweet angel.'

'Kaka-ka, Gaga-ga,' I imitated, and turning round slipped my hands under her ochre sari and squeezed her hanging breasts in childish joy. She felt happy and never once did she scold me for it, except, as I observed later, when I did it before everybody.

'You are a little darling,' she said and kissed me again, pressing me to her breasts.

'You are a darling too!' I rolled over in her lap.

'Now! There! Come and sit here!' she commanded, and I obeyed her. Sitting on her lap I was pained that she did not talk to me any more. And I sat thinking of the little calf that had died the day before, and the snake that I had seen that morning. Again she suddenly turned toward me and kissed me, almost violently.

'Akkayya, Akkayya!' I cried happily.

'My child, my darling!' she murmured and kissed me again. Not knowing how to show her my affection, I put my hand upon her shaven head and caressed it, though it was rough and prickly. She seemed uneasy and, pulling up her sari-fringe over her head, she took off my hand and held it in hers, tenderly. I was hurt and sad.

'Akkayya!' I called suddenly, 'Akkayya, why is your head shaven, when all others like aunt Nagamma and aunt Kenchamma and aunt Ranganayaki have their long, long hair?' It was dark and I could not

see her face, but the silence that followed was heavy and sad.

'Why, Akkaya?' I repeated.

'Because I am a widow, my child,' she answered, dry as the shopkeeper I bought gram from.

'A widow? What is it, Akkayya?' I squeezed her breasts again, in affection.

'A widow is a widow, my child.' She was surely sad.

'You are like aunt Nagamma and aunt Kenchamma, and you say you are a widow? No. You are one like us!' I explained.

'No, my child. Nagamma and Kenchamma have husbands. I have none.'

'Oh! no. You surely have, Akkayya. You have.'

'I haven't, my son. I haven't! . . .' She was embarrassed and sad. Her hands trembled.

'Nagamma has uncle Shama, Kenchamma has uncle Subbu, cousin Sita has grandpa, and you . . . and you. . . . I,' I muttered with a shrill mischievous laugh. It relieved her. She pressed me again to her breasts and kissed me.

'You naughty little imp!' she cried, comforted.

She had to go to the kitchen and I sat there thinking over the things I had done and I wanted to do. The next morning the cows were being driven to the fields by Mada, and I would follow him. I would see how they grazed. Then, coming back, I would offer rice to the sparrows, when my grandfather sat reading big, big books to the neighbours.

Then again, young Sundra would come to play marbles with me like today. How I would enjoy it! To play marbles . . . Akkayya came back silent as ever and sitting down took me into her lap. She looked troubled, nervous. Uncle Shama came in followed by the peasants and my grandfather was howling inside against somebody. In that confusion, we were strangely near each other and we felt one. I knew when she kissed me more, she loved me more, and when I squeezed her breasts more, I loved her more. . . .

'Why are you sad, Akkayya?' I asked, whispering with fear.

'Oh! . . . nothing,' she answered, dull and disgusted.

'And you do not put holy vermilion either,' I said, trying to find out what a widow meant. At that moment, apart from men, I had only known there were giants called 'thieves'. A widow! It must be something like that. But still. . . . No. I knew Akkayya so well. After a moment she answered me in the same sad tone.

'My child, I am a widow. . . .'

'But, Akkayya,' I insisted, 'it cannot be. You go to the temple like them, you *are* like them. . . . Why, Akkayya?'

'I am a widow,' she cried out in anger and looked towards the stars. I trembled and sat silent. Her hand touched mine. They were unfriendly to each other. And I remembered that they were bare, bare

like a tree. Aunt Nagamma and aunt Kenchamma wore bangles that clinked and sang. And she had none. And she always wore the same dull sari; not the blue, beautiful, gold-bordered ones of my aunts. Was she different from them? Was she? They had children too, Ganga and Parvathi and Swami, and Leela and Susheela and all with whom I played. Whenever they fell down or were hurt in a game, they went back weeping like dogs to their mothers, full of such false complaints. I hated them. I only loved Akkayya. And she? No children?

'Where are your children, Akkayya?' I asked, sheltering myself under her breasts.

'I have none,' she answered angrily.

'And I?' I managed to say.

'You . . . . You are Ranga's son, not mine.' She breathed hard.

'Why have you no children, Akkayya?' I asked again.

'Because, because I have no husband,' she answered-ed indifferently.

'What is a husband, Akkayya?'

'Oh, shut up! and don't bother me with all your *Ramayana*. A husband is a husband, a man. . . . '

'Am I a man, Akkayya?'

'I don't know!' she wailed. I was silent again. I had been half-initiated into the secrets of a 'widow' and I would not leave it at that. I wanted to know more: I had to know more. A man, a man, I repeated to myself. Uncle Shama was a man.

Uncle Subbu was a man: Yes! They were. They dressed in dhotis. They were not like aunt Kenchamma and aunt Nagamma.

'But why have you not a man, Akkayya? Kenchamma has one, Nagamma has one. . . . '

'Oh! shut up, you pariah, or I'll sew up your lips.'

I shut up and sat still. In a moment my father called me to go and have my dinner, and I sat amongst my aunts and uncles and my cousins as quiet as a cat. I was thinking: so widows don't have children either. No. Why not? I looked round and saw my uncles and my aunts and my cousins. Aunt Nagamma had uncle Shama; aunt Kenchamma had uncle Subbu; aunt Nagamma and uncle Shama had Susheela and Swami sitting beside them; aunt Kenchamma and uncle Subbu had Ganga and Parvathi and Leela, who sat by them. And Akkayya?. . . I ought to have sat by her. Suppose I asked her why she never dined? 'Widow!' again. 'Shut up, you monkey!' in her anger. No.

The dinner over I went to the central hall where Akkayya had already spread her bedding and laid herself down. She called me affectionately, and asking me whether I had eaten well and what I had eaten, she kissed me and asked me to get into the bed. I was so happy to find her gentle that I forgot all about my researches into the mystery of 'widowhood' and hardly in bed I slept like a prince.

Akkayya

After my father's wife had gone to live with him and had started the new household, I had naturally to go back. Of course I wept and shrieked when they were taking me away from Akkayya. But they gave me a big, big piece of yellow sugar-candy and put me into a horse-cart, and I forgot about everything, and not until I had arrived at my father's did I discover that Akkayya was no more with me. Well, I did not weep very much, for my father gave me semolina sweets and a blue filigree cap and my stepmother was as sweet as one could be. She not only played with me and put round my neck a gold chain with a shining diamond star, but . . . but, if you do not tell anyone I will whisper in your ears that she even suckled me as though I were but a tiny little baby.

During holidays we often went back to Talassana, but never again had I the same affection for Akkayya. My aunt Ranganayaki having died, her two children were left under Akkayya's care and she seemed just as contented with them as she was with me. Only once, I remember, she was particularly affectionate towards me and gave me a pair of gold bangles. I was so happy with the present that I kissed her as usual. But, being grown up now, I could not bear the smell of her mouth and I never did it again.

During one of these holiday visits to my grandfather—I was about ten or eleven years old then—somehow it struck me that I should know more about Akkayya. So I wanted to ask somebody, but going to one of my aunts or cousins I would be so over-

come with fear that I would excuse myself and run away, awkwardly. At last one day I got a very good chance. Uncle Shama loved me and he often called me to go and lie by him. That evening aunt Nagamma was busy in the kitchen, and being alone I took courage to ask who Akkayya was and why she lived with us. What uncle Shama told me I cannot quite remember, but it is something like what I am going to relate to you.

She was a sister of my grandmother, and was the eldest of eight children, three girls and five boys. Her parents were very rich people and my great-grandfather had been even a Minister once. That was, as you must remember, over a hundred years ago. Akkayya was a pretty little girl, full of charm and intelligence. When she was five she had already begun to discuss the holy scriptures with her father, and her horoscope foretold a most brilliant marriage. Her father, when a Minister, had known the Ministers of many neighbouring states. I do not know if you have ever heard of the Gagana State, on the banks of the Cauvery, just where she falls down the precipice into the frothy abysm below. It was a small state but it had a good king and his Minister Ramakrishnayya was an intelligent and able administrator. Ramakrishnayya had often come and stayed with Akkayya's father, that is my great-grandfather, and having lately lost his second wife, he was intending to marry again. When Akkayya's father heard of it he straightway sent a Brahmin to negotiate for his

daughter's marriage. Ramakrishnayya had never expected to be able to marry the daughter of an ex-Minister of Mysore State; and he was so flattered with the proposal that he came running and accepted the hand of Akkayya with becoming humility and grace. Akkayya must have been about eight or nine years of age then, and Ramakrishnayya, I cannot well remember, but his son had already three children of his own. The whole of Mysore was invited for the marriage week, and if uncle Shama is to be believed—he had, I must say, a very rich imagination—the Maharaja himself came to grace the holy occasion. The marriage over, the bride-groom's party left for Gagana, amidst hymns and holy music, leaving the little wife to come of age. Not very long after, Akkayya's father received a letter to say Ramakrishnayya had died of 'some fever', and they wept and they moaned for a few days, and after that everything went on as usual. Akkayya did not understand anything of it and she perfectly enjoyed the doll-show—for it was Dassera then. They only asked her not to put on the vermilion mark and she did not mind that in the very least.

Years passed. Akkayya came of age, and as was meet for a widow, she was shaven and sent to her husband's family in Gagana where she was received with due respect and affection. Her stepson, now about forty-five years of age, treated her as one of his own daughters, some of whom were married and had children of their own. Akkayya soon became the

mistress of the kitchen—she was the only widow there—and she did the cleaning of the vessels and the sweeping of the floors, as though she were born with a vessel at her waist and a broom in her hand. For four or five years she lived on thus and she was more than happy in that 'full house'; there were always children to play with, girls to talk to, cows to milk, and the temple to go to, oh, such an easy, quiet life. Her daughter-in-law, that is her step-son's wife, was a good woman, and as she was three months in the year in confinement, three other months in pregnancy, and nearly half the rest of the time in bed due to a fever or a cough, she did not bother Akkayya at all, and everything was perfect. When she went to the temple everybody stepped aside saying, 'The Minister's wife,' 'The Minister's wife,' and she felt so proud of being thus addressed that she went there more than ever before. Akkayya herself had told me a story, which I had completely forgotten and would never have remembered had not uncle Shama referred to it again. One day she wanted to see the waterfall. She had heard the *bhus-bhus* of it all the time but had never once gone anywhere near it. So a trip was duly arranged, and one of the police officers led the family of the Minister to the place where the Cauvery gallops forth into the narrow gorge, gurgling and swishing and rising majestically into the air like a seven-headed cobra. What do you think Akkayya saw? Would you believe me, she actually saw with those very eyes she had—and they were sharp I

assure you—she actually saw miles and miles of thick, strong jute rope swallowed by the abysm and yet it went deeper and deeper still . . . and God only knew how much deeper it was. They told the Minister's family that the abysm communicated with the centre of the earth. Oh how wonderful!

Akkayya was now about eighteen. She always loved children and she began to ask why she could not have some. Uncle Shama added his own opinion about it by saying—and I hardly understood it then—that women want children above all and they are jealous of those who have any. Whatever it be, Akkayya began to quarrel with her step-granddaughter and in a year things had grown so impossible that her stepson wrote to her brothers, my great-grandfather was dead by that time, to take her away, which they soon did. But it is a pity that her stepson should have been so mean as to say that she wanted to poison one of his daughters or that she wanted to sleep with him. I assure you, Akkayya was as pure a thing as the jasmine in the temple garden. When people hate others they always mix milk and salt. . . . Anyway Akkayya was back in her family and everybody was happy about it.

But that could not go on very long either, as her brothers did not agree between themselves and they quarrelled so much with one another that the family had to break up, the five brothers taking their own share of the patrimony. But nobody wanted to take Akkayya for even here she had begun to be jealous

of her sisters-in-law, all of whom had many children. So, my grandmother asked her to come and stay with her in Talassana, and for fifty years or more she lived in our family without quarrels or complaints. My grandmother was a sharp woman—God give her peace in her next life!—and she knew how to treat people. She let Akkayya have all the children to herself and Akkayya was as happy as a deer. She cooked for the family, sometimes discussed philosophy with my grandfather, and during the rest of the time she played with us. And, especially when by some strange misfortune three of my aunts successively died, leaving three, eight and five children, she had always enough children to take care of, and she treated them all alike, kind when they were good and severe when they were mischievous. And when these children left her, she forgot them as the cow forgets her young ones. But God always supplied her with orphan children, and as you will soon see it was these who stood around her as she breathed her last. That was her karma!

When uncle Shama told me the story I could not help weeping. And thinking of Akkayya I had a sudden vision of the black, moss-grown rock that hung over the Nandi precipice, firm, but insecure; it would fall now or it would never; and when the winds would rise and the tempests toss it over into the great mouth below, it would be no more, no more and all its hardships spent and lost. . . . The sky was gathering clouds.

Akkayya

I do not know why, but we did not go back to Talassana for four or five years. And the only news we had was a card that my grandmother sent us every three or four months to say everybody was well and that they were 'hoping to hear from us that all the prosperity, health and the hundred and eight joys' were given to us 'by the benevolent gods'. Only once, I think, however, was there a line about Akkayya being ill and that she had been bed-ridden for the past year. One year! It was never to be taken literally. Women have such a strong imagination! My father said he was sorry that Akkayya, who had never known sickness in her life, should now be in bed; and saying to ourselves that she would soon be better we never talked of it again. My grandmother did not say a word about it in the next two cards, and not until cousin Ramu returned after his short visit to Talassana did we hear the full story.

One day, as Akkayya, after finishing her bath, went and sat by the tulsi plant to say her prayers, she caught a bad cold and that very night it developed into a high fever. My grandmother, naturally, gave her some decoctions of herbs—a family secret she had known all her life. But the next day the fever was as high, and my grandmother gave her the same medicine. It was only on the third day, when Akkayya was almost unconscious, that they thought of calling a doctor. But she hated doctors—hated them like pariahs. To drink a medicine prepared with the

hands of those wretches—those irreligious, low-born, dissolute blackguards! No. No. She would rather die. They tried to persuade her; then they threatened her. But it was all in vain. That evening when our neighbour Venkatappa's wife came to see her, she brought a new decoction for 'such a fever',—also a family secret. It did not do any good either, and on the fifth day the doctor was actually sent for without Akkayya's knowledge. As soon as she saw him she rose up and, sitting in her bed, scowled and spat on him, so angry she was. But the doctor was accustomed to such welcomes. He asked my grandmother and grandfather to hold her two hands, and in spite of her howlings and moanings, he examined her and declared it to be a serious case of typhoid. He told them to be very careful, keep her warm, give her light food, and gave them a prescription to be dispensed at the Civil Hospital. My grandfather and grandmother did not know how to proceed, as Akkayya would never drink medicine brought from the hospital. They sat together and discussed it, and as my grandmother was a clever woman she suggested it could easily be mixed with coffee or soup; and so the medicine was brought. When Akkayya said, 'Sister, this soup smells horrible!' my grandmother would explain that when people have fever 'everything has a strange taste', and Akkayya never discovered the trick. But the medicine did not work, for Akkayya always wanted delicious mango pickles to 'clear her mouth', as she

used to say. Besides she kept talking all the time in her weak, delirious state.

It was a forty-eight-days' fever and when it left her she was nothing but bone and eyes. For two months or more she could not get up, and when she even sat for a moment she complained that her bones ached. At last she decided she would get up for the Shivaratri, and every day she used to tell herself that she was going to be better, and how wonderful it would be to stand up and walk. Sleeping in her bed, she used to dream of the day she would have a real good bath by the well, say her prayers, adorn the idols and keep awake all the night listening to the miracles of Shiva, the three-eyed one. In her joy she even sang in her hoarse, breathless voice:

> Shiva is Sri Rama,
> Shiva is the Lord of the all-dowered Gauri,
> Shiva is Sri Vishnu,
> Shiva is the King of the Crematorium,
> Shiva is Ganges-crowned,
> Shiva is snake-garlanded,
> Shiva is poison-throated,
> Shiva is the All, the All,
> Shiva is Sri Rama,
> Shiva is the Lord of the all-dowered Gauri.

My grandmother, who heard it from the kitchen, was happy too and prayed to God that her sister would soon be able to live as usual. Only, when Shivaratri came, they tried to lift her up and make her stand, but her legs had lost all their strength and

they bent down like plantain bark. They tried to make her stand by giving her their shoulders to lean on, by giving her two boxes to rest her hands upon; even by leaving her beside the pillars, but nothing would work. Akkayya was smiling all the while. She felt happy like a child that stands up for the first time, and she persuaded herself that she would be able to go to the temple by the evening—though for the moment the experiment was not so great a success! Anyway, at ten, the barber came and shaved her, and she was happy to have her head free. Then they took her into the bathroom—they actually carried her—and she sat on the bath-slab smiling and joking. She would get better. Of course she would! After the bath they carried her to the sanctum and, leaning against the wall, she prayed as usual, her little silver pot by her and the rosary in her hand. Then they wanted her to go to bed, but she refused and insisted on eating with all the others. But, in the middle of the meal, when she was just going to eat rice and curds, she fell down and rolled across her food. They washed her and took her back to bed and it was over a quarter of an hour before she recovered her consciousness. She did not seem sad. Her eyes still glowed with the ecstacy of a child, and she lay in the bed, smiling.

Of course she could not go to the temple that night. But she would soon—by Sankranthi. After one year, she still lay in her bed, much too weak even to sit up. But how very gay she was! Here, cousin

Ramu who told us the story, suddenly lowered his voice and began to whisper as though he were going to tell us a secret. We were anxious and listened with all our ears. 'The truth is,' he murmured, 'the truth is, I think she has a bad disease. . . .' Bad disease! I did not know what it meant. Nor do I know now. I only saw that my father's face turned grey as a coconut and my stepmother shivered. 'She stinks, she stinks horribly . . .' whispered cousin Ramu with disgust. 'She stinks like a manure-pit. I could not sit by her. I could not stay there for more than five minutes. . . . And yet,' he said as though consoled, 'you never saw her smile like that. She has the smile of a godly child. . . .'

That night I had a most horrible nightmare.

It was to be a cold morning. My bedding in hand, I walked down the station to our Old-Well house where my grandmother now lived. (My grandfather had lately died and uncle Shama, who loved his independence, stayed away in the Fig-tree house and sent Akkayya and my grandmother to the other one.) As I entered the courtyard my grandmother hailed me from the verandah where she was sweeping the floor. It was not a very big house. Just three rooms and a kitchen, with a spacious, elevated verandah, and a large courtyard with a sweet-water well in the middle. As I neared the house every step seemed to drag back and every breath sniff and choke at the idea of Akkayya.

I looked at the doors. They seemed so gruesome and bare. In which room was she? In which?

My grandmother whispered to me.

'The children are asleep,' she said.

'Which children?' I inquired.

'Why! Sata's . . . Sata's . . . ' she answered, a little hurt.

'But. . . . You mean they're all here?'

'No, no,' she whispered, beckoning me to sit on the parapet wall, 'only the last two are here. The father kept the eldest son and the eldest daughter with him.'

'When did they come here?' I asked.

'Over a month ago. Soon after Sata's death. . . .' It made me sad to think of aunt Sata. She was the dearest of women; she had died in childbirth.

'How is She?' I managed to say, trembling.

'Who?'

'She. . . . ' I pointed towards one of the doors that seemed, I cannot say why, to be Akkayya's room.

'You mean Akkayya?' she said, pained.

'Yes!'

'Well!' here my grandmother had tears in her eyes. 'Well, my son, she is between life and death. I wish she would die soon.' It sent a shiver through my back. For a brief moment we did not say a word to each other.

'Anyhow,' she began, trying to change the subject, 'tell me, how is everybody at home. Your father? Your sisters?'

'They're all well,' I said casually. My eyes were strangely drawn towards that door—Akkayya's door. Was she there?

In the meanwhile the milk-woman came and my grandmother went into the kitchen to get a vessel. I looked around. The morning was breaking. The sun was spreading his feathers like an amorous peacock. But it was still very cold. And somehow even the mango tree I loved so much was sad and sickly. The bullock-carts were creaking along, and the dust of the morning was rising. I was not going to stay with my grandmother. I had decided to go to my uncle's and had dropped in here only to pay my respects to her and to inquire after Akkayya. Now I must be going. . . . Somehow I felt breathless and wormeaten. Even my grandmother's face, which was always lively and young, looked as though she were being strangled. No, I must be going. But my grandmother insisted that I should stay and have a cup of coffee. I could not refuse it. But I could not stay there any longer. Telling my grandmother I would go and wash my face at the well, I walked out into the courtyard. The raw air, the pomegranates and the sky above seemed to give the sense of a fresher reality. I sat on the wall of the well, thinking of my grandfather, aunt Sata, Akkayya, and all those whom I had loved and lived with, and who were slowly disappearing one by one.

The children came out. Naga was a little girl of nine, pale, anaemic and quiet. Ramu was about

four, plump, wild and mischievous. I tried to talk to them and told them I was their cousin. But that did not seem to interest them. 'One more of us,' they seemed to say and walked away to wash their faces. Even in their countenance there was something heavy, sad, decaying. Death had entered the house like a cobra. When would He leave it?

The coffee was ready. Naga came to call me. I had not yet washed and so I simply threw a little water on my face, dried it and went in. Nobody was to speak loudly. Everything was hushed and uneasy.

'Do you want to see *her*?' my grandmother asked. I felt as though I were going to spit in my cup.

'No,' I said, nodding my head uncomfortably.

'She calls you a thousand times a day, and says she will not die without seeing you. . . .' She was in tears. I coughed.

'She wants badly to see you, my child. She says everybody in Talassana hates her, only you, your father and your mother ever cared for her . . . Oh, to see her weep! She weeps like a mad woman. And when she shrieks the tiles seem to fly to the skies! Suppose you see her?'

'No. I do not want to bother her.' I lied.

'It's no bother. She would weep to see you. My child, you must!'

'Yes, it is true,' added Naga. 'She always calls you and tells us you were born like a prince and you would be one. She tells us so many stories about you.' She laughed, and hid her face between her knees.

'No,' I said, 'I will not see her now. As I stay in town for another two or three days—we shall see.' My grandmother understood me and didn't insist any more.

'My child,' she exclaimed, sorrowful and breathless, 'my life here is really dreadful. Oh! to be living thus. . . .' She wept. 'These children are already a burden, and with them Akkayya. . . . No. Not a moment to breathe and not a moment to call my own. And then—' Here I heard from a neighbouring room Akkaya's shrieking voice.

'Naga! Naga! You dirty widow, you daughter of a prostitute, you donkey-whore! Come, or I'll flay you alive!'

Naga squirmed in her place. Her day was beginning. I must confess it sent a chill through me as though rising from a rotting well.

'Naga! Naga! hé, hé Naga! you dirty donkey-whore!'

My grandmother nodded her head and asked Naga to answer.

'You see, my child, that is how it is twenty-four hours in the day. I do not know where she learnt these filthy words of abuse, but not even a pariah would use them before his wife, such are her curses. "Naga, Naga." Always "Naga". This poor child, beaten and skinned to her last bone by her father, has come to live here, and her life as you see is worse than a dog's life. She has to take food to her, put it into her mouth, clean her bed, sweep the floor, and for

absolution sit listening to her mad, mad stories. But you see, my child,' continued my grandmother, trying to be a little kinder to her sister, 'you see, sometimes she folds these two children in her arms and weeps over them for their unhappiness. She calls them by all sorts of endearing names—my parrot, my calf, my diamond. . . .'

'That's true! She is sometimes very good,' agreed Naga.

'Naga you concubine, Naga you wretch, Naga you donkey . . .' recommenced Akkayya. There was a painful silence for a moment. We all stopped breathing. Naga sipped at her coffee.

'Does she ever get up?' I ventured.

'Never. We carry her to the bath and bring her back. All the morning I do nothing but wash her dirty clothes, we have two beds for her which we change from day to day, then wash her saris, take her to the bath, wash her myself, then taking her back we put her in her new bed.' Here she seemed to draw back her hands and wipe them with her sari to feel sure the foul smell was not sticking to them. 'She is never silent even for a moment, and we can never have anybody here or go to anybody.'

'But,' I said, 'why not?'

'Why? The moment she hears me going down the steps she begins to shriek for me and weep and roll in her bed till I go to her. And when I go she asks me to sit, and when I sit, she laughs at me and tells me a story I have heard a million times before.'

'You see, my son, that is my life. At this age—I am sixty-two now—I cannot say I shall go on pilgrimage and lead a pious life. Nothing but curses in my ears, instead of Ram Ram, and nothing but washing filth the whole day instead of sacred baths in the Ganges and the Jumna. . . . ' She began to sob. What could I do? Again it started:

'Naga, you wretch, Naga, Naga . . . Naga. I will burn you today if you do not come,' Akkayya shrieked.

'Go, Naga, go,' said my grandmother, and the little girl limped out of the room mechanically.

'Listen! Listen and hear what she will tell her.' I went nearer the wall.

'You dirty whore, you dog-born, you donkey's wife, this is how you come when I call you! I have been shouting for you for hours. Oh, I wish I could get up and tear your skin like my sari. You dirty donkey-whore! Why don't you all let me die? Leave me, throw me into the well and drink a good, hot seer of milk? You would, wouldn't you? You cur, dirty cur. Why don't you go and sleep with the servant, you concubine?'

'Tell me, what do you want?' said Naga. Her voice was firm and indifferent.

'What do I want? What do I want? I want some coffee to drink, some hot water to wash with. And you are a dear, a darling. Come and kiss me.'

Naga came back and sat with us as though nothing had happened. Hardly had she sipped her coffee once than Akkayya again called out:

'Naga . . . Naaga. . . . N-a-aga.' She moaned like a dying woman. 'Go,' said my grandmother. Naga went, the cup of coffee in her hand.

'Now tell me, donkey-whore, who is it that has been here this morning? Sister has been talking to him all the time.'

'Nobody. It is only your dream,' answered Naga drily.

'You buffalo! You concubine! Don't tell me a lie.'

Naga came back and Akkayya continued to shriek. My grandmother rose up in a fury and went out with a thousand curses upon her lips. I put my ear to the wall and listened.

'So you have come back, dear sister, dear sister,' said Akkayya with such love that my grandmother was suddenly disarmed.

'Why did you come, dear sister?'

'Because you shrieked.'

'Did I? But tell me, dear sister, when will you burn me?'

'Don't speak nonsense,' consoled my grandmother, troubled.

'Nonsense. No. Tell me only one thing: When I am dead and when you have burnt me, will you ever remember me?' She laughed.

'Why do you speak such a queer language, Akkayya?' my grandmother asked comfortingly.

'No, sister, no. I have given you so much trouble, such sinner's trouble. Will you always remember me, me your elder sister?'

'Surely! And respect you as ever. . . .' From my grandmother's voice I knew she had melted into tears.

'When I am dead, sister,' continued Akkayya, 'be sure to write to Nanjunda, Ramanna and Mari, and tell them their sister died with their names upon her lips.' She too seemed to weep. 'Tell them, I am their elder sister—and though they never once did give me as much as a sari, tell them, I love them all. . . .'

'Amma, amma,' wept my grandmother and—God knows what made her say that—she whispered, 'Akkayya, little Kittu is here. . . .'

'Kittu . . . Kittu . . . My darling Kittu . . . My son, my child, Kittu!' she cried madly. I trembled and gasped for breath. Would I go? Would I? But her words rang in my ears like bells of the temple. 'Kittu . . . Kittu . . . My son, come, come!' Unconsciously I was up and was walking towards Akkayya's room. The two children followed me. Even at the door a foul stench breathed on me. I entered.

Akkayya lay there, her eyes white, her face pouchy and husk-like, and she looked at me—a true image of death. Then suddenly she turned towards the wall and cried out: 'Kittu . . . Kittu . . . Kittu . . .' like a frightened animal.

Naga bent down and covered her parched thighs . . . And I wept.

One evening when I came home—some four years later—everybody looked annoyed and uneasy.

I wondered what it was. They asked me to remove my outer garments and go into the hall. I knew somebody had died. My sister? Uncle Shama? Cousin Susheela? Who? Who? Undressed, I went into the hall, trembling. My stepmother had already bathed beneath the tap, and the water was being boiled in the bathroom for all of us.

'Akkayya is dead,' said my father irritably and in utter disgust.

'When?' I gasped.

'The day before yesterday,' said my stepmother. I sat like all of them, waiting to have my bath; but I assure you my soul was in true distress. 'Akkayya . . . Akkaya . . .' I said to myself like one who calls a beloved soul, 'Akkayya. . . .' I heard my stepmother say:

'Could they not have had the sense to hide it from us for *the* six months? What a nuisance!'

'Idiots!' howled my father.

'Perfect idiots,' spat my stepmother.

'Who is Akkayya?' asked my little sister.

'A grandmother whom you have never seen, and thank heavens you will never see,' said my stepmother and walked away into the kitchen.

We duly bathed, changed our clothing, and after dinner we went to the cinema.

I think, between the three brothers of my grandmother, my father, and a cousin of ours, none of them wanted to take the responsibility of performing

Akkayya's obsequies. At last one of her brothers called a Brahmin, and giving him a few rupees, asked him to perform the 'necessary' ceremonies. I do not know whether the Brahmin did it. Anyway, here I have written the story of Akkayya, maybe her only funeral ceremony.

NARSIGA

HIS father had died of cholera, his mother of famine, and one sultry afternoon, a thin, tall woman, angry and effusive, turned up and calling herself his aunt carted him away into a distant village, where she took a husband for herself from one of the widower pariahs, 'to bring up this poor orphan child', she said. She worked in the houses husking the paddy, and he worked on the fields of the Master. But one day the Master said, 'Why not come and stay in the ashram, Lingayya, we shall give you a hut!' And Lingayya took his wife and his wife's 'orphan' and settled down on the Master's lands. She rose up early to light the bath-fire for the ashram boys, then she swept the floors, washed the vessels, and when she had nothing else to do, she took the Master's child to play with the deer in the garden. Meanwhile, young Narsa, the orphan, played with the dogs or pulled the tails of tethered cows. He was nearly five years old, and very soon he would have to go out like the other boys to graze the cattle. But the Master said, 'No. We shall buy him sheep, and he shall go out with the sheep.' And at the next fair of spring, the Master bought him not only five sheep and three goats, but even a pair of country slippers and jacket, and every morning as the sun pierced through the thatch-hole and beat against his shut eyes, he would suddenly stretch out his wiry limbs and leap up like a frightened

frog. Fixing his fallen dhoti about his bulging round stomach, he would brush back his scattered hair and walk out into the yard. Shiva! Shiva! The sun was already high up over the Rampur Hill, and the Master's students were on the terrace for the morning meditation. Time to take the sheep into the woods! But the Master's brother, the same who beat boozy servants and chastising husbands with a whip of supple, shining leather, caught him by his hair and said:

'You little monkey, why do you grow hair like a sheep? If a thief were to catch you he would shear your head with a single stroke.'

Narsa said, 'If a thief comes, I will slip beneath his feet and gallop back on my sheep. I can already ride on them.'

'You little fool,' cried the Master's brother, touched and amused, and going back into his room, brought back a pair of long silvery scissors, and cut away Narsa's swarthy hair. Only a little soft hair remained—such as the city people have—and the Master's brother brought perfumed oils and combed Narsa's head till it shone like black beads, and caressing it, Narsa went into the woods, the sheep before him.

Bow-legged Rangayya, who worked on the Corner-fields-by-the-Canal, saw Narsa going into the wood with the sheep, and said, 'Hé, you little monster From when did you become an earning person? A though there were not enough of us wanting to live!'

'What do I know, Uncle?' tittered back Narsa. 'The Master bought me sheep, and the Master's brother cut off my hair—and they send me into the woods. . . .'

'Well, anyway, will you look after my own sheep, you son of my woman!'

'Yes, Uncle. Oh yes, Uncle. . . . And how many sheep have you?'

'I have—well I have three, my dear fellow. And if ever you bring them home alive evening after evening for six months, I shall give you a packet of sugar candies.'

'Where are they—the sheep?' asked Narsa, joyful. 'Where are they—your sheep, Uncle?' He already saw in front of him sheep after sheep, sheep that bleated and kicked and browsed over the rockless side of the blue Kantur Hill, sheep that wept and sneezed and dunged, and the mother-sheep that forgot their lambs, and the puffy, white ones, naughty and restless that would so often stray away from the fold that he must hang a bell at their necks which would tingle-tingle-ta across the woods.

'And a little one too, Uncle? Where are they—your sheep, Uncle?'

'Oh, I'll buy them at the next fair and bring them home. I'll buy six of them.'

'All right, Uncle,' cried Narsa and took the sheep into the woods. He drove them into the bael woods, on the bank of the river, and left them by the railway embankments where the grass flourished between the

gravel. Sometimes he drove them as far as the cactus growth by the village crematorium, for there the grass grew to unmeasured heights. One day he even saw a corpse getting burnt. There was such wonderful playfulness in the fire. He gazed and gazed at it from behind the cactus-over-the-mound, and when he went home, his aunt tore the skin off his back—for 'the dead are not for the living', she said.

When Uncle Sampanna had bought his sheep, and Carpenter Siddayya had bought a few too, Narsa drove into the woods more and more sheep. Sometimes he would ride on them, and go thinking himself one of those powerful gods that have animals for their vehicles. Now he would be Shiva, the Serpent-garlanded, and the knotted grass became the serpent and the long-horned goat the bull. And now he would ride on Rama's chariot of flowers, a bael flower at the sheep's tail, and two others behind its ears. And my, such a rain of flowers welcomed him back to Ayodhya! Sometimes, when it was too hot to leave the shade, he would take a little lamb and lull him to sleep as his aunt did when she was sober. But suddenly he would feel like sucking milk, and rushing to a mother sheep he would put his mouth to the teats and suck. The sheep would try to kick at him, but he would give it fresh grass, and suck teat after teat, beat his head against the udder and suck. Once he was satisfied he lay back on the grass—and laughed. Sometimes laughing he grew tired and slept till the

sun was nearly set, and hearing the cawing of the evening crows, he would rise up and, gathering his sheep, hurry back home. Driving the sheep into the pen by the well, he would wash himself with a little water from the leather bucket and go into the hut. Dusk would have fallen and it would be hardly visible within. But he would feel himself into the bed-corner, fall flat on the floor in prostration before the gods—for the gods gave food, auntie said—and taking his bowl that was always by the hearth, he would sit out in the courtyard and munch his rice and pickles. Often auntie turned up after having lighted all the lamps in the ashram, and she always brought back a bowl of soup or a piece of city-sweets that the Mistress gave her when she was going home. She was a good woman, the Mistress! May she have a hundred male issues, auntie used to pray again and again.

'Hé, orphan, come back, you little monkey!'

'Yes, auntie. And what do you think I saw today? A huge big serpent, big and shining and hanging down into the canal. I took my stick and tried to fling him into the water. He jumped up like a little dog, but I took my stick and beat him and beat him till his head was torn off his body. But suddenly as I looked from the corpse to the rocks, the rocks to the fields, and the fields to the hills and the hills to the wide white skies, I was so beaten by fear that I ran over the bund moaning and shouting. What do you think of that, auntie?'

'What do *I* think of it! I think that you are a wretched imp, and that happily for me one of these days you will be food in the mouth of Death, and I shall drink one full seer of warm milk in satisfaction that I have not to bother myself with such a monkey as you.' And suddenly rising up, she ran to the kitchen-fuel and, taking a stick, she beat him on the back and on the legs and on the knuckles. Narsa knew quite well, the more he howled and wept the more she would be afraid, for the Master's brother loved him and disliked people being beaten, so yelling and beating his mouth as at a funeral, Narsa would shriek loud into the night. Far off in the Master's house, the light was to be seen in the drawing-room—therefore the Master had not yet gone in for dinner. People were sitting round him, and maybe among them would be the Master's brother.

'Amma . . . Mother . . . Amma . . . ,' Narsa would gurgle in his throat, as though he was laughing more than weeping. 'Amma. . . .'

'The Master's brother has gone to Tippur to buy provisions, you wretch. I've seen him on the station road. I've seen him with Squint Ramayya, with baskets and sacks. He won't come to rescue you. And, by the grace of God, for once I'll give you a good anniversary, a jolly sweet one too.' And feeling irritated against the constant intrusions of the Master's brother, auntie beat him all the more. But Narsa really never suffered from it. He knew the Master's

brother would fret and howl at auntie—and then taking Narsa into the big kitchen give him mangoes or city-sweets.

'You whore of a woman,' Pariah Lingayya cried out from the cattle-shed where he was chopping hay. 'Don't you know this is not the house of the dead, you witch?'

'It's not you who bore this child,' she shouted back, and gave Narsa fresh blows on the back.

Meanwhile the Master's brother was seen coming through the milky path that winds round the well. He is tall and his cigarette is shining like a fire-fly. He coughs as he moves along. The spotted calf is prancing behind him, and suddenly running towards him butts him from the back, and leaps across the yard and furrowed field. A pumpkin-moon is just rising over the Rampur temple.

Auntie stops beating, throws her arms akimbo, and feeling very self-righteous, begins the tale before she is questioned.

'I lick your feet, Master. But this boy is ruinous. He steals everything in the house. He does not even allow a grain of rice to remain in its place. He ate away a quarter of a pau of melted butter yesternight. And just now when I came home. . . .'

'You liar,' retorts Narsa, sheltering himself behind the back of the Master's brother. 'Master, you know I don't rob, I don't thieve. I simply eat what I am given. She simply tells lies. Master, she is drunk, that is what it is. . . . Yesterday night,

Master, she and my uncle beat each other. . . .'

'No, Master, no. I lick your feet. No, I'm not drunk.'

'Give me the accounts. I gave you five annas this afternoon. What did you buy?'

'Master, I bought . . . half a seer of rice, a pau of dal, onions, chillies, salt. . . .'

'Where, at the toddy booth, you pariah? Do you think I can't smell you from here, you wretch, you ruin-of-a-house. You get drunk and beat this orphan till his bones are broken. Unfortunately they're calling me for dinner. Else it would have been your marriage day. Thank your horoscope it isn't. Anyway, from today onwards Narsa will sleep in my room. You never can be relied on. Oh, you buffaloes!'

While auntie is falling at the feet of the Master's brother, Narsa suddenly jumps on her back and cries out 'hoye-hoye' as though he were on a sheep. The Master's brother drags him away with him. In the house they put him by the cradle of the child, and till the dinner is over and people have chewed the betels, Narsa stands recounting story after story to the child. It is hardly ten months old, but whenever it sees a late crow sailing across the sky, it thrusts its little hands towards the porch and cries out, 'Caw-caw . . . Cawww'.

'Little Master, so the lion said to the tiny mouse,' continues Narsa, giving the cradle a jerk, 'I shall be your friend and you shall live with me.'

Narsiga

Across the courtyard, out there in the coppery light, the hut is seen squat as a quern, and at the door two shadows are sitting face to face, lifting their hands to their mouth. Behind is the flat expanse of the shining river, and a quail is heard to splutter through the night. From the palmwoods rise the wails of hungry, clamouring jackals.

After dinner Master came and sat in the courtyard, and the Mistress and others sat round him, listening to him. Master made such funny jokes, and everybody laughed. Sometimes people came from the city to see Master, people with gold rings on every finger of their hands and some that had wives drowned in gold and in nothing but gold. They said Master was a big man and even kings wanted to see him. Auntie said, there was a big, big man called Gandhiji, and the Master knew him, and had talked to him, and the Master worked for him. Who was this Gandhiji? Narsa had asked. 'An old man—a bewitching man, a Saint, you know! He had come from village to village, and I have beheld him too,' auntie said. 'He looks beautiful as the morning sun, and he wears only a little loincloth like a pariah. And they say he is for us pariahs, like the Master is for us pariahs. They say he works for the pariahs as the Master works for us. They say he loves the pariahs, as the Master loves us. He is a great man. They say he is an incarnation of God, that is why everybody touches his feet, even Brahmins, my son. You will touch his

feet too, some day,' auntie had assured him. 'When you touch his feet you feel as though the body has sunk to the earth, and you are nothing but a mere ant before an elephant. But he is so simple! He pats you on the back, and says we must love each other, and spin at home, and when he says don't pay revenue dues to the red man's Government, we should not pay them. You know those city-boys who come to learn under the Master. They are the Mahatma's men. And the Master, he is a Mahatma's relation—one of his chiefs.'

And Narsa was so moved that, that very evening he slipped beside the chair of the Master, and putting his two little hands on the Master's legs tried to massage them. The Master patted him on the back and said:

'Why are you here, Narsiga?'

'Master, Master,' he blubbered, 'I felt like it. You see, Master, I love you. And you love me, Master. And auntie said you are a Mahatma's man. And I love the Mahatma too. . . .'

And when Narsa had said this, everybody around him laughed so much, that he felt overcome with shame and wanted to slip out of the place, when the Master's brother caught him by the hair and thrust him back into his seat. But the Master was so kind that he made Narsa sit on the arm of the chair, and caressed his neck and his back. He is such a good man, the Master! But then all of a sudden the Mistress turns to Narsa and says:

'Narsiga, what has happened to you, my dear fellow? Why is it I saw you this morning with a huge big shoe, twice as big as your head? What has happened to the ones I gave you?'

'Mother,' he lisped, 'the ones you gave me, Mother. . . . I lost them by the canal . . . the other day.' Seeing that the Mistress was not angry, he became bolder and continued: 'You see, Mother, it happened like this. I had let the sheep eat the bael leaves. I had torn them down with my scythe and I had let the poor lambs eat them. They were munching and munching. I saw a big dog coming from the opposite side. Mother, it was on the opposite side of the canal. You know, Mother, the same dog that had eaten away our small deer and had left the bones by Ramayya's hut. It is big as a wolf, Mother. I threw stones at him.'

'But what about the shoe, you idiot,' swore the Master's brother, impatient.

'It is about the shoes, Master. I had torn down the leaves. The sheep were munching and munching. The big dog that had eaten the young deer stood just near the sluice of the canal. He sat with his paws down, his ears stretched, and I knew with one jump he would fall on my sheep. I took a stone and sent it straight at him. He simply gobbled a fly on his body and would not look at me. I felt frightened. I had no more stones by me. I took my left shoe and sent it straight against his eyes. The devil rose up and wagged his tail, looking all the time

at Sampanna's fifteen-day-old lamb. I took my second shoe and sent it straight against his legs. It hit him this time, and he wailed and turned back. "Now he is down," said I, and I rushed at him, my stick lifted up. But he grabbed at one of my shoes, and ran off towards the crematorium. I ran too and not until I had sent him by the village temple did I stop. The shoe, Mother, he took it away, the same brown dog, with an ear torn off. The other—I never found it. But I'll beat him one day, Mother. The next time I catch him I'll give him a good skinning.'

'Well done, my hero,' cried the Master's brother, who always loved to joke. Narsa felt comforted. Yes, he had done the right thing. But the Mistress again turned to him and asked:

'Then why didn't you come and ask me for a new pair, you fool? You shouldn't go about among the cactus thorns, barefooted.'

'Mother, I wanted to ask. But, you see, Mother . . . I went and asked uncle Sampanna. He said he would pay me eight annas a month if I looked after his sheep. He said he would buy me sweets with it. Then, said I to him: "Uncle, buy me a pair of shoes instead for this pair. I have to walk bare-foot, and it is summer, the sands are scorching, the stubs hard, and the goats throw thorns on every path". He said, "No, a pair of shoes costs too much. Take mine. They'll do for you". "Quite so, Uncle," I said, and he gave me the ones he wore. I put my

feet into them and I said, "They are too big for me, Uncle". He put some clay into them, and stuffed some leaves at the back, and he said, "Go ahead!" They pinched me as I walked. But I dare not ask uncle Sampanna. He is an angry man, and auntie says he is a very bad man. . . .'

'Why didn't you come and tell me? I would have squeezed it out of his flesh,' spat out the Master's brother. Narsiga was embarrassed and silent.

'Why didn't you come to ask me for new shoes?' the Mistress said angrily.

'For nothing,' he whispered, hiding his face behind his arms.

'Speak, you monkey!' commanded the Master's brother.

'Mother,' he began, trembling, 'I can't say. I saw that you gave a blanket to the old Mohammedan beggar; I saw that you gave a shirt to Barber Ranga, and you give food every day to Chandrayya, and Sampanna and Rajanna and all the people who live in our huts. Mother, you give milk for Chinnamma's child and Ramamma's child, and I have seen you prepare woollen head-gear for them. Mother, you are so good. How can you feed all? . . .'

The Master was moved. He patted him on the head and said at the next fair he would have a pair of shoes. But Narsa would not have it. Why should Master give away everything? Narsa earned eight annas from Sampanna and six annas from Rachanna. He took their sheep into the woods. And when the

Master's brother was distributing wages the following Tuesday afternoon for the weekly fair, Narsa cried out, grave and authoritative like Shop-keeper Ramachetty had done to Pariah Rachayya, who hadn't paid his debts,

'Hé, Sampanna. You owe me eight annas.'

Sampanna feigned not to hear.

'Hé, Uncle,' cried out Narsa again, trying to let the Master's brother hear it, 'do you hear? You owe me eight annas.'

'Oh, yes, yes. Another time,' he said, and rose up to go.

'Master, Master,' whispered Narsa in the ear of the Master's brother, 'I want to buy a pair of slippers, and uncle Sampanna has my eight annas.'

The Master's brother fumed and spat, and uncle Sampanna paid him not only eight annas, but eight and eight and eight annas—he had not paid for such a long, long time—and Narsa went into the fair the same afternoon, to buy his pair of slippers, a pie worth of Bengal gram, and he bought something else that none saw and none knew, but the next morning everybody wondered who could have stuck a paper-flower on the cradle-stand. Narsa himself wondered.

Narsa is now a big person. He can reach the Master's waist. He now wears long jackets and big slippers, and even a cap such as the sahibs wear. 'It protects the eyes,' the Master said. Besides he now knows how to read. He can read what is written

on the top of tea-boxes, and trains, and once he had even tried to read the paper that the postman brings to the Master every day. Rangappa, the sullen student of the Master, gives lessons to Narsa and the other ashram boys. They sit every evening at lighting time in the verandah of the central building, and there they learn alphabets and words. And Narsa even knew a poem that was printed in the middle of the book—you know, the one about Mother Cow and the Hungry Tiger? Poor orphan calf! But what Narsa liked the most was the prayer at the end. It was so sweet. It spoke of the Mother. Mother who was good, Mother who was kind. Mother who grew rice. Mother, Mother, Mother, it ended, and Narsa always sang it closing his eyes and figuring the Master's wife—sometimes it was only his auntie—as a huge big goddess, sitting on a swan, like the one in the picture by the sanctum door, a huge light behind her head, a conch in one hand, a wheel in another, and a tamed lion at her feet. She held rice in one hand and a lotus in the other, and it was surely the same, thought Narsa, to whom he sang. And when it came to the end, 'Mataram, Mataram, Vandé Mataram,' Narsa's eyes suddenly grew full of tears, and the whole earth seemed to grow soft and radiant, and he felt his head resting on the lap of a great big mother. 'Mataram, Mataram, Vandé Mataram', he gently lisped to himself.

But he wanted to know who this Mother was. He heard the other boys in the ashram say that one

should fight for the Mother. One should pray for the Mother. One should love the Mother.

'Who is this big Mother, Sir?' he asked one day of his teacher.

'Mother,' he said, 'which Mother?'

'The one we sing about after the classes are over.'

'Oh! you idiot,' swore the teacher. 'Why don't you know even that much, you buffalo? It is our country, our Motherland.'

'What is our country, Sir?'

'Country! Country is the one we live in. This is our country.'

'But it is ours,' Narsa said.

'No, no,' cried the teacher. 'The country is big, a million million times as big as this ashrām. But it is no more ours. The red man rules us. He takes away all our gold, and all our food, and he allows the peasants to starve and the children to die milkless. He has put the Mother into prison. But, my son, you must not hate him. He is not a bad man. But there is a devil in him, a monster and a devil in him. The devil haunts him. And one day when we shall have driven him out of the country, we shall be happy and beautiful and our Mother will rejoice in her freedom.'

'Master, is the red man the same who comes hunting in the woods, with big huge, white hats, and faces like the monkeys? But, Sir, they are bad men. Bad men. What do you think, Sir, last year when I

took the sheep into the woods, one of them, one of these red men, put up a little tent by the big bridge of the river. He had one servant, two servants, and three servants. They all went behind him. And they had dogs too. I knew they went in search of deer. Poor things! So I used to sit behind the huge pipal by Saint Rahmna Khan's tomb, and cry 'Ooo, OOOO' like a deer. The dogs came running. And the men followed. They caught me and beat me. Sir, they are bad men—the red men. I saw them beat Left-handed Rachanna too, for he had sworn at them. They had walked across the fields hunting a crane. Bad men, Sir, very bad men. And the Mother is caught by them. And they beat her. Sir, I too will also fight against them. Tell me, Sir, how can I fight against them?'

'You are too young, you idiot,' swore the teacher. 'You cannot fight now. Tell the truth, and love everyone, says Gandhiji.'

'Gandhiji, Sir!'

'Yes, it is the Mahatma who says it, the Saint. Speak the truth and don't be cruel to anyone.'

'Where is the temple of this Saint, Sir?

'No temple for him, idiot. He is a living man. He is in prison now. He is always in prison. The red man has put him there.'

'Like the Mother, Sir?'

'Yes.'

'But, Sir, there is one question I want to ask,' he said, very thoughtfully. 'If my sheep were to stray

away, I have to beat them. Now, if I have not to be cruel should I beat them, or should I not?'

'Oh, don't bother,' cried the teacher irritated, and Narsa went back to the hut ruminating whether to beat the sheep or not. And the snake, it is a wicked thing. It comes rushing towards you when it sees you. And they said tigers lived in the jungles, and the jackals, and many frightening things. He would ask the Master. He would ask him that very evening.

But when the evening came, and he sat by the Master, he forgot all about it. He only knew Mother was imprisoned by the red man, and the red man beat her. And because Saint Gandhi came to take her out, they put him also into prison. And they beat him too. Sometimes in anger, Narsa used to tear down long branches to beat the red man, only once, for beating but once is not cruel. He beat his sheep but once, and he liked them all the same. And when the train thundered over the bridge, he used to lift up his long sticks, and wave them in the air, for red men went in the trains, and they would be afraid. One day he even arranged an assault on them. He could not, of course, do it alone. So he spoke of it to Rami, Scavenger Sankanna's daughter Rami. Rami came every day to the ashram hospital to do her business, and the Master's brother used to cut jokes and say she was Narsa's wife. Narsa liked it. And whenever he saw her, he used to run to her and undo her braid. And she would hide her

face behind the sari and weep. But sometimes Narsa used to sit near the hospital and wait for her to come. When he saw her by the old-well-corner, he would do the business himself and surprise her. It pleased Rami. And every day he did the business Rami accompanied him as far as the railway embankment, and then she went back home along the line. Now, one morning Narsa took Rami with him, and having gathered a pocket full of gravel stones, he stood by the bridge, and as the train slowed down, he took up stone after stone that Rami handed him, and flung them against the train. When he had thrown three or four or five, he shivered and ran back—and that evening there came on him a fever such as he had never seen. It rose and rose and his body began to burn like the rocks by the canal. Auntie said it was because she had not offered the goddess the promised coconut and bodice-cloth. But he knew why he had fever. The devil in the red man's body had seen him and jumped into him. And Narsa swore and prayed night after night, that never would he throw stones at the red man. The Saint Gandhi said, 'Love the red man'. He would love them. But he loved the Mother too. And he loved Saint Gandhi too for he had tried to rescue the Mother from the red man. 'Saint Gandhi,' he said, beating his cheeks to ask forgiveness, 'pardon me, O Saint. You are great. You are next only to God. You are by the Mother. Saint, I shall never hate the red man again. Take away the devil from me,

Saint. Saint, I fall at thy feet and kiss them. O Saint!'

The Saint seemed to take him in his arms and pat him as the Mother did. And Narsiga burst into such a flood of tears that it gently floated him down into softest sleep.

On a sultry autumn day when the earth was breathing out dust and nothing but dust, Narsa came home earlier than usual, and what should he see in the Master's house but many and many a city-man and villager gathered round the Master, with happy faces and weeping eyes. 'What is it, Uncle?' he asked old Rachanna of the corner-field, who sat by the threshold. 'The Mahatma is released from prison, my son,' said the old man. 'The Mahatma, the Saint,' shouted Narsa, 'the Mahatma, the Saint', and running out into the courtyard he danced and threw stones at the trees, and frolicked with the deer. He saw Nanjakka carrying Master's child in her arms, and he ran to the Little Master and said, 'Little Master, the Mahatma is released. The Mahatma, the Mahatma!' and he made the Little Master clap his hands and laugh. Then he ran into the pen and told the sheep the Mahatma was released, and rushing towards the fields where he had seen uncle Sampanna ploughing the fig-tree-plot, he said, 'Uncle, Hé, Uncle Sampanna! The Mahatma is released. Leave the fields and rejoice. The Mahatma, you know, is going to fly

in the air today like Goddess Sita when she was going back from Lanka with her husband Rama. He is going to fly in the air in a chariot of flowers drawn by four horses, four white horses. He is going to pass by our home, Sampanna, what do you say to that, hé?' and dancing round and round himself he fell on the grass and rolled. But Sampanna had urgent work to do, and the news did not touch him. So Narsa jumped up and ran to the old-well-plot where Carpenter Rangayya—the same who had fallen from the ladder some time ago—would be working. But the carpenter was fast asleep on a little plank, his turban spread over his face. 'Hé, wake up, Rangayya, the Mahatma is out of prison, out of prison—the Mahatma. . . .' 'I knew it, you idiot,' growled Rangayya, 'I knew it long before you.' 'Oh, uncle, you don't know that the Mahatma is going in the air—like Rama and Sita going back to Ayodhya. Sita was taken out of prison and they flew back to Ayodhya. Master says, the Mahatma will fly like that, with four white steeds, such as even the District Collector never had. The Mahatma. . . . The Mahatma. . . . The Mahatma. . . .' But seeing his 'wife' Rami coming along the canal path, he rushed towards her to declare the great news. 'The Mahatma is released . . . the Mahatma . . . the Mahatma . . .' he shouted out. 'And the Mother too. The Mother and the Mahatma are both released by the red man. Hé, what do you say to that, Rami?'

'What do I say?' mocked back Rami, smiling in

her sari. 'I knew it long before you. You see I've already the little flag. They gave it to me, the city-boys. And in the village square the Master is going to speak and all the householders are gathering there this evening to listen to him. Did you know that, you son of my woman?'

'That, oh, yes, I knew it long, long ago,' he lied. 'But you don't know, the Mahatma is going in the air, with his wife Sita, and in a flower-chariot drawn by sixteen steeds, each one more beautiful than the other. And they will fly through the air and the heavens will let fall a rain of flowers. The Mahatma will have the Mother on his right, and our Master at his foot, and they will go across the clouds and the stars. And we shall gaze at them. Come Rami,' he dragged her towards him, 'come, we shall run into the village to sit in the square to be the first to hear the Master speak. Come.'

He hooked his arm into hers, and taking the flag thrust it up into the air, and shouted, 'Mother, Mother, Mother,' and they ran across rut and puddle, dung and boulder, down the Rampur road, amidst screeching bats and hovering crows, over the canal bridge, and under the bulging, haunted pipal, and then turning round the Kuppur mound, they faced the cattle dust of the darkening village. The air was light, and the night was just falling. But, Lord, what a lot of stars!

A CLIENT

THE last bell rang. Gathering his notes and his books Ramu left the class with his usual hurry. Sundaresha was standing on the steps talking to somebody. No, Ramu would not see him. No, he would not! Unconsciously he jumped down the verandah and walked along the gravelled path with redoubled speed. How he hated them all, these rich, carefree people. . . . Oh! if only he had his own books. It was not his fault if he had not done well in his last examinations. How could he? One cannot learn without books. His brother could write all that nonsense about working hard, getting a university scholarship, and bringing a name to their ancient, revered family. If only he knew what it was to wash one's own clothes, clean the vessels, cook the food and sweep the floor, and spend uncountable hours waiting at the doors of Sundaresha's to be condescendingly honoured with the loan of a book. To talk to them charmingly, when you detested them in the heart of your hearts, to flatter them, cringe before them, and even slave for them when necessary. It was not easy like swearing before peasants or commanding one's wife. Bangalore is not Hariharapura. If only his brother knew that.

'Ramu, Ramu.' Somebody was calling him. Lifting up his head he saw Jayalakshmi, his neighbour in the

chemistry class, coming towards him with her usual smile of friendliness and forced mockery.

'Ramu, you're coming with me in my victoria.'

'Sorry.'

'I suppose women not being equal to men, you cannot sit by me.'

'No. I'm in a hurry.' The devil throw the girl into the fire. But somewhere, something graceful and mysterious swept up, drawing him into forbidden secrets, sweetly tender. But the Brahmin in him woke up. The caste mark was not on his face but on his soul. The sweetness sank into ashes. Away. . . .

'Goodbye, Jayalakshmi.'

'Bye-bye.'

He grit his teeth, and thrusting away all thoughts of Jayalakshmi, he walked on trying to think of the approaching examinations. As he passed by the pipal tree near the gate, he saw a queer old man standing on the road, and smiling to every student that came along, exaltedly, expectantly. He wore a gold-laced turban and a loose longcoat in the old fashion. He was bare-footed, and his dhoti, also gold-laced, was creamy white; and by contrast his wrinkled dust-covered feet seemed bluish green like cow-dung. Coldly returning his smile Ramu walked away feeling somehow that things were not well with him. Perhaps it was just tiredness. Or only loneliness. Or, who could say, maybe the cat he had seen at the window on waking up forbode something terribly evil. No, no, he assured himself, the gods would not

desert him after all these years. They would help him and bless him. 'O, Kenchamma, O Goddess, my salutations to Thee!'

He hardly got to the Mysore Bank Square when he heard somebody calling him from behind. The voice was unfamiliar but affectionate. And turning round whom should he see but the same old man, more smiling than ever, and his eyes beaming with intense, surging love. Ramu shivered.

'Ramu,' cried the old man, running up to him, breathless, 'Ramu, are you not our Ramu of Hariharapura?'

'Yes,' he murmured confusedly. His lips trembled and he perspired all over oppressed by some unaccountable fear. He would have preferred to meet the will o' the wisp than this haunting old man.

'That's it,' he exclaimed, putting his hands on Ramu's shoulders. 'There you are, my boy. When I saw you by the gate I was sure as the dog knows its food that you were our Ramu. . . . But I wanted to make certain. And when I asked somebody who came behind you he said I was right. Well done, my old man, I said to myself, no mistaking it. And I ran and ran. But how like a fawn you fly! Now let me see. So you're our Krishnappa's son and Shama's brother? What, Ramu, how is Hariharapura? Is it always the same old Hariharapura?' Who the devil could this be, thought Ramu to himself, as they moved on. He knows my father, he asks about Hariharapura—and the wretch that I am, I

never remember people. How he speaks too with such familiarity! He must be somebody I know! Surely. . .

'Everything goes on as usual,' he muttered mechanically.

'And how is our old friend Bhatta? When I saw him last, he was already losing his eyesight and he had been rather ill. Is he better now?'

'I believe he had died some years before I was born,' answered Ramu, still confused. 'But his son is living and I know him pretty well.'

'Oh, I'm sorry for the old chap. Anyway when you see young Bhatta will you give him my blessings, and ask him if he still remembers me. Will you, my son? And now tell me: How are the Corner-House people? How many children has Venkanna's son, Srikantha? I had been to his marriage. That was the last time I saw Hariharapura. Oh, that I should have left my byre and my manger. But in those days, who would have refused a job in the Bangalore Secretariat? I was young, I was brilliant, and one day I would be an amaldar or a sub-division officer, I thought. And I went. . . . And I have never been able to go back and visit my relations and find out whether they were dead or alive. Government service, my son, is like prostitution. Once you take that profession you cut away all bonds. But why all that now? I have had enough of that slavery. Thanks be to God, I am out of it. Well, I retired from my service, and have had to stay on

here for the education of my children. Each summer I said to myself, let the vacations come and we will go to Hariharapura, and drink the sweet waters of the Hemavathy. But children never have enough. They always cry for more. If only they were like other children, obedient, loyal, hard-working. Oh, what shall I say of my children? But . . . Let me see. My Srinivasan is in your class. Surely, in yours. . . . You know Srinivasan? S. T. Srinivasan? Now, tell me, Ramu, and I shall swear to you on anything I shall never let it out, tell me if it is true that he is very full of pranks in the class, that he has joined a group of vagabonds who smoke cigarettes and go to the houses of prostitutes. Tell me, Ramu, tell me!'

What could he answer? The question came all of a sudden and Ramu was still thinking, trying to remember all the people he knew, and all the relatives one talked of at home, and yet he could remember no one resembling this queer old man, who spoke with such familiarity and affection. Brother Shama, his brother, who knew his relatives to the tenth generation, had never said a word about him. Surely he would have, and no doubt have sent Ramu along directly to this old man when Ramu first came to Bangalore. And again, this Srinivasan? He had no class-fellow with that name.

'I'm sorry,' he stuttered, embarrassed to put a straight question. 'I'm sorry. Excuse me. . . . I don't remember where I could have seen you.'

'Good God! Ramu, how scandalous that you

should ask who I am! Good God! If you should forget your relatives so soon then I know how little you will care for us all, when you will have gone through the Civil Service examinations and become District Judge or Assistant Commissioner! Really, really! I cannot believe my ears. No, I cannot. But . . . I must accept it. It is not your fault, my son. It is the immoral influence of this ignoble education called "modern".' He gave an accentuated sigh, and pathetically holding on to Ramu's arms, he continued, 'Well, my son, anyway don't ignore your relations. No, please don't. But, as you have forgotten who I am, I'll tell you. I am Hosakéré Nanjundayya. . . . Ho-sa-ké-ré Nan-jun-dayya.' He stood straight in front of Ramu, peering at his eyes. Ramu felt somehow abashed, repentant, revolted. Hosakéré Nanjundayya. . . . Ho-sa-ké-ré Nan-jun-dayya. . . . No, he could remember no such name. He felt unhappy. The cat at the window reappeared. Ill-luck. Wretched. . . . Wretched. . . .

Looking at the old man he suddenly felt relieved. The shame turned into pity, and then into courage.

'Please pardon me,' he burst out almost without a thought, 'I think I still cannot recall where I could have seen you. I really am ashamed of myself. . . . But, you see, my memory. . . .'

Nanjundayya now wriggled with amused laughter.

'Why,' he cried, still laughing, 'Why, I knew your family before you were born!' How often I dined in your house. Oh, how often! Your father, dear

Ramu, simply adored me. He could not, he used to swear, live without me. You see he was my sister's brother-in-law's wife's maternal uncle. And when I went to see my sister in Kantur, he always sent for me and would not let me go till the vacations were over. . . . And my sister naturally complained that I never stayed in her house. Poor thing! now she is dead, and so is your revered father. Oh, that I should survive them.' He seemed almost in tears. But he soon gave a forced smile, and continued. 'Now, tell me, Ramu, my son, are you still in the Verandah-House? Or have you moved to the new one your father was building by the mango grove? I told him it would simply be a waste of money. But he would not listen. "I want my children to be happy," he would declare. "I will build a house that will house all of them with their wives and children and children's children."'

'We still live in the old Verandah-House,' said Ramu. In fact he had never heard of such a plan. He was still rummaging his memory to find out who Hosakéré Nanjundayya was. Neither his sister-in-law nor his brother Shama, nor in fact the talkative Bhatta, had ever spoken of a Hosakéré Nanjundayya. Strange! So very strange. Absurd.

They were now in Chikpet, and Nanjundayya insisted on taking Ramu to the Udipi Coffee House. Ramu refused at first, but when Nanjundayya forced him with threats and prayers, he accepted, and they went in. The Coffee House was full. But they found a comfortable corner near the kitchen door.

'Now tell me, Ramu, my son,' said Nanjundayya, as soon as they were seated, 'what will you have, *dosé* or *uppittu*?' What kindness! What respectful friendliness! Ramu said with his usual sense of politeness that he did not want anything. But Nanjundayya was a man of experience. He knew a man by his face. A few kind words and Ramu said he would have *uppittu*.

'Lakshmana,' shouted Nanjundayya, familiarly and authoritatively. A curly-haired, bright-eyed, intelligent-looking, immaculately-dressed young boy came running, with an amused, almost mocking smile upon his face.

'What ho! Nanjundayya, it is ages since I have seen you. Perhaps you haven't had enough clients.'

Clients! Ramu was startled. Why, the old man had just said Government Service was so damnable. . . . And clients! But then, he said he had retired from service. Perhaps he is a clerk to some lawyer. So many retired people become clerks to pleaders and advocates. But why did the boy smile so mockingly? No, no. Perhaps Nanjundayya comes here often. The boy was just joking with familiarity. Surely. . . .

Meanwhile somebody called Nanjundayya from behind. Ramu turned back. The man looked crude and malicious. 'What, my dear Nanjundayya,' the man shouted teasingly, and his 'dear' was interminably long and emphatic, 'What, my dear, dear Nanjundayya, does the world still go round and round,

my man? Ahum! With your gold-laced turban, your beautiful velvet coat, your gold-laced dhoti, you look, my young man, a veritable bridegroom. What! whose daughter? The Prime Minister's or the Maharaja's, hé?' Lord! This very devil, this villain of a Vishwanath, to come here, here . . . and at this moment. . . . Nanjundayya was furious. And with a violence that seemed strange in that smiling, sentimental old man, he howled: 'Get away, you impertinent man, get away! Do not display your monkey tricks before respectable company! Go your way, you devil!' And turning to Ramu Nanjundayya gave a broad, triumphant smile. This devil was not his friend! No! The brute took undue liberties of familiarity. How Nanjundayya had spat on him. Couldn't get away with it. Isn't that so, Ramu?

Vishwanath was gone. He laughed heartily, amused at the serious air of Nanjundayya. Harsh words did not matter to him. He was accustomed to it. He was a professional jester. He sat not far from them, chattering away to a young man who laughed so contentedly that he spat out the coffee that he had half-swallowed. Ramu was burning with anger. He detested them all.

Now the *uppittu* was brought. And munching it, they continued to talk.

'Then you do not know anything about my Srinivasan?'

'No.'

'Anyway, you must come with me and meet my wife and children. After we leave the Coffee House you will come along with me. You will, my son, won't you?'

'I would very willingly have come. But, you see, my exams are approaching. . . .'

'Exams! Exams! Why, for a brilliant boy like you, why this fear of the examinations? Being first in all the examinations, you cannot plead with me that you are afraid of them! No, you cannot!' It was a painful blow to Ramu. First! Why, if only he could get through, merely have the minimum. First! Yes, in Hassan High School. Not here. Not here. He felt humiliated. He felt angry. The cat suddenly appeared at the window, glared at him, and disappeared. Was he only talking in his dream?

'Anyhow, look here, my son,' Nanjundayya was shouting at Ramu trying to make him more attentive to his talk, '*Do you mean to say* examinations are the end and aim of all your existence? It is because of these examinations that we have become such slaves, losing our ancient traditions and our self-respect. Do you know what Mahatma Gandhi thinks of it? He thinks it to be one of the most pernicious elements of our modern life. Do you listen to me, my son? And after all what does it matter in these days whether you are a B.A. or M.A.? All get the same thirty or forty rupees a month. And even to get that, what fortitudes, what briberies, what dust-licking humiliations one has to bear. But, Ramu,' he corrected

himself, patting the other's back, 'No, no, I do not mean that you will be one of these twenty-five or thirty-rupee clerks! Oh, Ramu! I swear to you on the spirits of my ancestors, no, I did not mean it. I am sure as the hawk knows its prey that you will have ten such clerks under you.'

'With your blessings,' said Ramu politely.

'My blessings,' cried out Nanjundayya bursting with milky enthusiasm, 'well, my blessings are always with you, always, always! Why, Ramu, if I did not give my blessings to you, who else do you think should have them? For all the food that I have eaten in your father's house, and for all the affection I have received from your family, could I not be even so generous as to give you my blessings? You will get through all your examinations brilliantly, and marrying a rich man's daughter you will be a big official of His Highness the Maharaja's Government. But when you are a Commissioner or a Judge, do not forget this poor Nanjundayya, my son. . . . Oh! do not. . . .'

The word marriage disturbed Ramu. How often had he not racked his brains with it? From the day he had discussed with Jayalakshmi the unhappiness of most of the couples where the man is 'modern' and the wife of the old, traditional world, he somehow could not find peace within himself. He saw nothing clearly. To marry an uneducated girl, and be unhappy all one's life, then. . . . To marry for money! Well, it would help one for a moment. But

afterwards. . . . To have one's life ruined because of a few rupees! Oh, no! How horrible. . . . But then, how long to live like this . . . cooking . . . washing . . . sweeping . . . counting each pie as though it contained the germ of eternal happiness. Impossible. A good marriage is profitable for the moment. . . . A room overlooking a spacious garden. . . . A smiling wife bringing in hot coffee. . . . The langour . . . . The mother-in-law's supplications. . . . A veritable small divinity. . . . Books on the shelf, beautiful green, blue, golden books. An electric light at the bedside. . . . No smell of kerosene oil. . . . Work till midnight. . . . Exams. . . . 'How have you done, Ramu?' 'Not bad.' (In his heart: 'Excellent!') Results. . . . Ramu first! The eager, envious flattering looks of the class-fellows. . . . And all Hariharapura shouting his glory.

'No, I will not forget you,' mumbled Ramu, pursuing his own thought

'Let us see. Let us see,' chuckled Nanjundayya. 'Don't I know these assurances! When you will be, say, a District Judge, and I come to you, you will ask the servant to tell me that you are either too busy or too tired to receive anybody, and thus politely turn me out. How many such cases have I not heard of or seen. Could you believe me, Executive Engineer Ramaswamy is my own father's aunt's grandson. And yet when I went to see him the other day, he sent word through his peon to say he was going out and that he could not receive me

at the moment. And again, take Chandrasekharayya. Yes, Chandrasekharayya the Minister. He is my own cousin . . . that is, my grandfather's brother's grandson. Today when he was passing by Chikpet in his new car, I greeted him and he did not even return it. Oh, Ramu, what shall I say of all the others who are my closest relations, and friends, and with whom I have played when I was a child? You see, my son, it is all due to this pernicious system of education. Yes, I know, Ramu, you will never treat me like that. I am sure you will not. What a dear fellow you are.' He patted Ramu again enthusiastically. But poor Ramu! The idea that he would be a big government official at once flattered and disquieted him. Would he get to be a big man? A man of distinction and authority? Perhaps never. . . . But who could say? The future might hold pearls in its palms. Engineer? Minister? No, never.

'Lakshmana,' Nanjundayya shouted out again.

'Yes, your esteemed Highness!'

'Two coffees,' he said, when Lakshmana arrived. 'But wait a moment, Ramu, what more will you have?'

'Nothing.'

'Now, don't play the woman! Come, tell me.'

'Well, then I will have a *dosé*.'

'I say, Lakshmana. Two coffees, warm, very warm, mind you. And two *dosés*.'

'Yes, Your Highness!' Lakshmana was amused at Nanjundayya's generosity.

'Now,' said Nanjundayya, turning to Ramu, 'look here, my son. Eat as much as you like. When one has a guest like you, even a miser will turn the Generous Cow. And especially when one knows that you have to cook your own food. I know, my dear Ramu, cooking one's food for oneself makes the very rice and soup worse than manger-munch. I know it, poor boy!' How Ramu hated him. He wanted pity from nobody. The wretch! The old owl! But how did he know about Ramu's cooking his own food? If only he could catch the rascal who had revealed it. . . . Well. . . . But he smiled. He could not betray his thoughts.

Meanwhile Lakshmana brought the *dosé* and coffee. These little boys moved hither and thither like fairies; and they brought you things before you had winked your eyes a dozen times. Swallowing a big morsel of *dosé* Nanjundayya continued.

'There is nothing like having a home, my son. Especially for one like you who has lived in such comfort.' ('Have I?' thought Ramu.) 'You are so soft and quiet. Yes, my son, you need a home. And after all why not marry?' He smiled confusedly. 'I am sure you have already thought of it. And in these days which boy of your age would not have thought of it? Well, Ramu?' Ramu was silent. Still the same tormenting question! Why the devil talk of it all the time? Stop it, old fellow! and leave me to myself! Please.

'Anyway, tell me, my son. How old are you? Why, what a silly fool I am! Don't I know it? I know

your horoscope as I know my own! You were born under Jupiter, on the eleventh day of *Asvin*, in the year *Bhava*. So,' he counted on his trained fingers, 'you are nineteen years, four months and three days old.' How the devil did he know all this? Who could have told him? Perhaps he remembers it? Or. . . .

'At nineteen, my son, you must begin to think of marriage. And . . .'

'No. I have not thought of it. Nor shall I think of it. At least not for a few years.' He was decisive. He felt happy to have made that decision. He needed such forced moments to make up his mind about things. And once made, he held to them stubbornly, irrevocably.

Nanjundayya went grey as a plantain flower. But he knew his trade much too well to lose hope. When he had tackled hundreds and hundreds of 'modern young men' of Bangalore, yes, of Bangalore, what did a country-kid like Ramu mean to him? Patience! And he would win the game.

'I know all these sophisticated tricks, Ramu!' He looked greatly amused. 'I know them as I know myself. It is the same old story all over again. You say to us, in front of us, that you do not want to marry, and secretly you wish you could get a rich man's daughter. Well, well, my son, don't count me for a peasant. In this very Bangalore—this home of modernism—I have spent these three-and-thirty years. No, you must be plain. It is no use trying to hide your feelings. How will you hide them when

you have a little wife by you, and a rich father-in-law shining only in your light? . . . And then, you rascal, you will still tell me you don't want to marry, you little monkey?'

'I assure you, I don't want to marry.' Ramu was grave. He looked determined.

'You need not marrry now, my son. Nobody forces you to.' Nanjundayya changed his tactics. He suddenly became serious and deep-voiced. 'No, I do not want to force you to do anything. . . . But, you see. . . . I mean, you see. . . . I have placed all my hopes in you. . . . Your father, Ramu, was such a great friend of mine that I loved him as though he were my brother. And, though I have a son, he is not one in whom the hopes of a decrepit, dying old man like me can be placed. So you see, my son, I would like to see you a big man, a rich man, and married to the daughter of a man of money and distinction.' He seemed almost to plead, to beg. Ramu was moved. How very affectionate, he thought. 'Ramu, if I could ask the gods a boon, it would be to give me a son brilliant, sincere, loving like you. Of what use all the herd of children I have—puling, shrieking, jealous, indifferent children! They eat all I can give them, and always want more, more. They are always hungry and always weep, crying they haven't all the clothes they need. And yet, old as I am, I have to slave for them from dawn to midnight, to earn so that these brats, these vagabonds, may have enough to grow fat on! Oh, to earn for one

like you, Ramu my son, it would dispense one of Benares!' Nanjundayya had tears in his eyes. He would have sobbed like a woman were he not in a Coffee House. What would Ramu say to please him, to comfort him? He looked so pitiful, wretched. Ramu smiled with sympathy and respect. Nanjundayya's face grew more lively and his eyes beamed forth confidence and hope. Yes, the game was not lost.

'Ramu,' he continued, pressing Ramu's arms with gratitude, 'Ramu, I cannot tell you how I . . . love you. O, how happy I would be to see you one day an Assistant Commissioner with a dozen servants and half a dozen clerks. Yes, Ramu, I would weep with joy. I would be happier still to find you with a beautiful wife, sweet, tender and obedient, clothed in a Dharmawar sari and adorned with diamond earrings, sapphire and ruby necklaces, and a half-seer gold belt to complete it all. If I were you, my son, I would marry now, this very moment, so that I should have a home to live in while in Bangalore, and a wife ready to live with when you will be an Assistant Commissioner in four or five years' time. I would, if I were you!' He smiled almost ecstatically. Ramu thought: After all, perhaps the old man is right. Old men are always so full of ripe wisdom. . . . Why not marry? Sofas. . . . Hot coffee. . . . Electric light. . . . But . . . if the future should turn out to be dark and treacherous. To live a life of misery. . . . Jayalakshmi was right.

'I would have married if I were you,' continued Nanjundayya. 'Listen to the words of an old man. My son, there's nothing like timely marriage. To marry at nineteen, to have nuptials at twenty-one, and to have a child at twenty-two or twenty-three, that is the ideal, the ancient, infallible ideal. Nothing like it. Listen, Ramu, suppose you begin thinking of it. And I assure you, for the sweet memory of your esteemed father, I would do anything to get you a suitable father-in-law. You have only to say yes, and you will see in ten days' time everything will be settled. I do not say this to flatter myself. But I must tell you that there are few families in Bangalore that I do not know, and in all of them I am treated with consideration and love. And at this very moment I know of at least fifteen mothers who would fall at your feet and call you their god and offer their daughters in marriage to you. Well, Ramu, my son? What do you think of it?' Would he accept? Should he? To be married to a rich man's daughter. But no. He had to be patient. He had to think over it. For the moment the best thing would be to refuse.

'No,' he said softly, respectfully, 'no, not for the moment. I am going home in a few days, and when I am back I shall have decided one way or the other. In any case, for the present let me say no.' Home! He was sure never to speak about it to anybody. But why did Jayalakshmi come into his mind suddenly. Surely he was not going to ask her opinion of it. Her brilliant, mocking smile came back with cruel

precision. Why did she stick to him? He had never cared for her. He had never asked her to be friends with him. No! No! The sooner he decided to drop her the better. These modern girls are so dangerous. But something in him revolted and affirmed itself with terrible softness. A luminous feeling filled his being. Warmth. . . . peace . . . harmony . . . Jayalakshmi.

'Well, Ramu, my son,' went on Nanjundayya with indefatigable patience, 'anyway, I shall look for a suitable bride for you. And when you are back you will tell me your decision. There's no hurry —not the least. You understand, my son. This poor Nanjundayya will always be the same old chap, tender, generous and paternal, and he only wishes one thing, and that is Ramu's happiness.' His lips trembled, and his eyelids gently closed with emotion.

'May your blessings be on me. I promise you again. I will think it over.'

They had now finished their coffee. Nanjundayya went to the counter, paid the bill, and joined Ramu on the steps. Ramu was happy to be going home. He was glad of the treat, but now he had to go and work. So, turning to Nanjundayya he said 'Well, when shall we see each other next?'

'Why, Ramu!' exclaimed Nanjundayya anxiously, 'surely you do not want to disappear so soon! I want so much to take you home and show you to my wife and children. You must see them, my son, you must.'

'Please do excuse me, do. I shall surely come and see you before I leave for Hariharapura. But not today.'

Nanjundayya looked embarrassed. What the devil could one do with such a boy?

'Anyhow,' he said after a moment's reflection, 'you go by Dodpet, don't you? I go the same way. So can we go together?'

'Most willingly,' answered Ramu amiably, and they hurried along the busy Chickpet. When they were at the Dodpet corner, Nanjundayya suddenly stopped, his hand upon his forehead, looking irritated, restless and confused.

'My son, my son,' he cried out helplessly, 'I am awfully sorry. I had completely forgotten that I had an engagement at six with a friend. I am really sorry. Would you mind coming with me for a few minutes—just here, in the Potter's Street—and I will see you home? Unless. . . .'

'Of course I can do that,' answered Ramu. But what a curse!

They walked on silently for some time. Nanjundayya still looked greatly annoyed, and now and again he would unconsciously stop for a few seconds as though thinking over something, and suddenly turn to Ramu, force a smile and ask to be excused for this irritating delay. He had lost his vigorous gesticulations and his bubbling gaiety. But Ramu was much too lost in his examination worries to think about the old man's moods. They were soon in the New

Market Square, and slipping through one of the side streets, they arrived in a narrow, quiet lane.

'Thank God!' exclaimed Nanjundayya, 'we are out of that noise and stink. Well, Ramu, you are going to see one of my very best friends. Vishweshwarayya was a class-fellow of mine. From an ordinary constable he rose to be the Director-General of Police, all by sheer intelligence and courage. You will see for yourself what a simple, generous, unassuming man he is. He simply loves me. He does!' Nanjundayya's enthusiasm seemed less brilliant and he spoke in a mechanical staccato. 'He retired some years ago, and now what do you think, Ramu, he is one of the richest and most powerful men in this city. He has four sons-in-law, and all in responsible posts, entirely due to his influence. There is no Minister, Ramu, there is, I tell you, no Minister who does not go to consult him and ask his advice on the most important affairs of the State. . . . And yet you will see, what an honest, respectful and loving man he is. . . .' Ramu was a little tired of all this. He was thinking of his room, books and examinations. But the old man continued. 'You will see all that for yourself. I'm sure you will.'

They slipped again into a smaller lane and were soon in a narrow square, where among mud-walled houses there rose a two-storied bungalow, with a balcony, curtained windows and a large garden of mango and guava trees.

'That is the house,' said Nanjundayya, pointing

towards the bungalow. 'You will see how very fashionably it is furnished. All in modern style. . . . All. . . .' They were at the gate. Nanjundayya opened the door as though it were his own house. And when they were half way up the main drive, Vishweshwarayya himself came down to meet them. He was tall, and his navy-blue suit in European style shone like sapphire with the evening sun. He had a very amiable smile upon his face and his voice was deep, deferential. Thanking Ramu for having honoured him with this visit, he led them to the drawing-room. Nanjundayya was silent now, and looked more annoyed than ever. What after all was this, thought Ramu. But Vishweshwarayya kept him so busy with questions—what subjects he had chosen for his degree, where he lived, and how long he intended to stay in Bangalore—that Ramu had hardly any time to think. Somehow he felt uneasy. Besides, this beautiful drawing-room in European style—lamp-shades with birds on them, vases with artificial flowers, velveteen carpets on the floor, and magnificent gilt-framed pictures of the English countryside—all this so bewildered him that he felt confused and lost. Suddenly the door opened, and a charming girl of eleven or twelve, dressed in a gorgeous Dharmawar sari of blue and gold, entered with a silver plate full of fruits and cakes and glasses of coffee, and placing it on the table by Ramu, went and sat, between her father and Nanjundayya, her hands upon her knees, shyly, awkwardly. There was a crammed silence.

Nanjundayya, who had been silent so long, turned dramatically towards Ramu, and roared with victorious laughter. He had won. Ramu sat on his chair, his hairs on end, and feverish with indomitable hatred. Immediately he remembered the cat at the window. It licked its feet, and with quiet, sinuous movements, lifting up the head, glowered at him and fell on the autumn leaves below. In the neighbouring room, his fat landlord, with a large tummy and one eye, sneezed. Once . . . Twice? . . . No. . . Fallen into the trap, thought Ramu. Yes! he had. Would he marry the girl?

> My Prince, Royal Prince,
> Charming Prince, Eternal Prince,
> You are mine and I am yours,
> Virtuous and adorable, my Lord, my Husband,

sang up the innocent voice.

IN KHANDESH

'TOM-TOM . . . Tom-tom . . . Tira-tira . . . Tira-tira . . . Tira-tira . . . Tom-tom . . . Tom-tom . . . Listen, villagers, listen! Assemble ye all after midday meal . . . at the Patel's. . . . At the Patel's . . . after midday meal. . . . Tom-tom . . . Tom-tom . . . Tira-tira . . . Tira-tira. . . . Everyone. . . . All. . . . Important business . . . Important . . . Tom-tom . . . Tira-tira . . . Tom-tom . . . Tom-tom. . . .'

Dattopant wallowed in his bed, dreamily. A terrible pain in the stomach had kept him awake till late at night. And then, what with the heavy monsters that rolled over his belly, the horse that galloped without neck or tail, the noise of the child near him, the breathless flight in the air, funeral processions, death-drums, temples and rupees, and mimicking monkeys—he could not sleep. Each minute he woke up, moaned, and turning away his head, threw his legs aside, and forced himself to sleep—but sleep would not come. Deep in the night he heard an owl hoot somewhere—somewhere near. Was it from the coconut-tree? The neem-tree? . . . No, it was from the roof. Death, said the elders, an owl on the tiles means death . . . death in a fortnight. He would have liked to get up and cry 'Ram Ram' to frighten away the owl. But he felt

tired and restless. After all, to wake up the whole house, make a noise, cry, moan. . . . And move to another house. . . . Where? And for six months too. He, his old wife, his two quarrelling sons, his haughty daughter-in-law, and the puling, whining, slobbering brats . . . No . . . Impossible . . . Perhaps the owl was on the palm. No, it was not on the roof. For sure, no! However let's say 'Ram Ram', 'Ram Ram'.

Then the owl changed into sheep, the sheep grew long, twisted horns and became a buffalo. A black rider sat on it, a looped serpent in one hand. The buffalo put its muzzle on Dattopant, licked his flesh, sniffed—then with a dart flung into the depths of the raging clouds and was lost. Dattopant too was lost. A noose was round his neck. The black rider was dragging him . . . dragging him. . . . Where? Oh, that eye-shutting abysm! . . . 'Ram Ram', 'Ram Ram', he yelled in his sleep. 'Ram Ram, Ram Ram.'

'Can't you shut your mouth?' howled his wife. 'The children are asleep.'

'Hé?'

'Oh! Be quiet.'

No, there was no owl. Forcing every joint in his body to loosen he put his head against the wall, and went to sleep. There were no nightmares. He had not slept long, when it was already dawn, and he heard noises of birds and of cattle waking up, and of people coughing and spitting, and walking about the

house. But the half-awakened calm was so comforting that he lay on his bed undisturbed. How streamlike was that rest!

'Tom-tom . . . Tom-tom . . . Tira-tira . . . Tira-tira . . . Tom-tom . . . Tom-tom . . .' he heard the drum beat. He moved his head towards the door and tried to listen. But he feigned as though he were fast asleep. If his wife should see? He even tried to snore. His grandchildren passed near him. The little one, the last born of the second son, cried, 'Grandpa, Grandpa!' He almost felt like smiling back. But he couldn't—he wouldn't. Somehow closed eyes on a hot morning is so enchanting. Funny and bright like a juggler's show.

'Tom-tom . . . Tom-tom . . . Tira-tira . . . Tira-tira . . . Tom-tom . . . Listen, villagers, listen! After the meal, everybody should assemble at the Patel's . . . Everybody . . . Important business . . . Tom-tom . . . Tira-tira . . . Tom-tom . . . Tom-tom. . . .'

'Important business! Important business!' Dattopant said to himself. 'What could that be? After all everything is over now. Thotababa's Tailend field was already auctioned by the government. Poor chap! One of the richest fellows in the village, his father was, in my father's time. Owned half the cotton-fields. They said gold was used to pave his floors. Thotababa! We told him, didn't we, not to get indebted to that Parsi? But he wanted money—money. If not how could he pay for his pilgrimages,

marriages, mistresses? . . . And now. . . . Ha! Ha! Poor Thotababa! Ambudevi is Bhattoji's mistress now. Where there's money, there are women. Juicy girl too, Ambudevi. But poor Thotababa! Grind the corn, brother, grind. Then there was that affair of the toddy contracts. It was to be auctioned. Patel, Patwari, Revenue Collector, Police Inspector, Zamindars, motor cars, peons, shouts. Who gets the contract? The Parsi! Why, for every rupee we can pay he can pay two. He comes from Bombay, they say. And he has the red man's money. He throws us money and buys our cotton. Pays for the seeds, and pays for the births, deaths, funerals, all. . . . And for the revenues too, with mortgages. Only Sampathji said, 'I'll go to the town and sell it at eight annas a maund more.' Patel's visit. Patwari's visit. 'Oh, don't you do that!' Sampathji's bulls stayed in his byre, but his stick ran at the Parsi. Missed him! Pity. Be done with him and his money! One would have had a good drink after.

'Hé, buffalo! How long will you lie buried in your bed?' It was his wife. She was sweeping the floor, and the dust was already entering his nostrils.

'Hé? Is it morning?' he asked, yawning and cracking his knuckles as though he were just waking up.

'Morning! The sun is high enough to char you to skin and bone, hé!'

'I'll rise.' He drew up his eyelids painfully. From the opening in the roof, the sunshine poured like boiling pus—thick, steaming, white. The whole

heaven is a hellish white bubo, he used to say. How it pours and pours—nothing but pus. It rains pus. And the earth—it drinks the pus, imbibes it eagerly, avidly, sucking. . . .

Rising up, Dattopant folded his little mat and putting it in the corner walked out into the courtyard with his bed-sheet. It served as blanket at night and upper cloth during the day. The streets were empty, and the flies were busy humming round the dung and the dustbins. The earth, tanned, hard earth, was lying flat, breathless, benumbed. From the neem by the street, came the acrid, fermented smell of oozing liquor. On the high palms two vultures sat, with their fleshy necks, bald as though they had eaten their own skin. *Grhita, grhita, grhita* they hurled their ominous grunts. In Sayyaji's house they were killing a cock for the match-maker. The pipers would soon begin the music.

The world seemed full of hot silences, and—noises . . . noises. . . .

From near the temple came the gasp and grunt of the tamté-drum: 'Tom-tom . . . Tom-tom . . . Tira-tira . . . Tira-tira . . . Tom-tom . . . Tom . . . tom. . . .'

'Important business,' said Dattopant to himself, 'important business,' and walked down the street towards the Devil's Ravine for the morning ablutions.

In Khandesh the earth is black. Black and grey as the buffalo, and twisted like an endless line of

loamy pythons, wriggling and stretching beneath the awful beat of the sun. Between a python and a python is a crevice deep as hell's depths, and black and greedy and forbidding as demons' mouths. They seem to gape their mouths to gobble you . . . to grapple you like crocodiles on a blazing day and drag you to the bottom of cavernous depths. *Baye* . . . *Baye* . . . *Baye* they seem to cry inaudibly, eager, rapacious, hungry. And they stream out breaths. The breaths are white and parched, curling and twisting and falling back like vermin. They search for a leg, a hand, an eye, a mouth, just to pull you into the abysm of the earth. Field on field is nothing but pythons and abysms—crocodiles waiting for their prey, vermin searching for a carcass. Then, suddenly, there is a yawning ravine in the endless immensity of the python-world, the chief python of pythons, with his venom flowing in red and blue and white. The red venom shines in the sands. The blue one lies in the shadow. And the white is the bubbling, steaming water that crawls over the bed, as though the pus of heaven had turned liquid. The blood of the earth mingles with the pus of the skies—to bear cotton.

Rows and rows of cotton. Thin, unmoving, bone-like plants, with little skulls in their hands that split and crackle with the heat of the sun. Like the purity of the soul is their substance, within the twists and holes of the skull. But within their purity is the hidden venom—venom again! Black seeds, small

knob-like seeds, sitting beside one another as though in clasped conspiracy. The pods would go to the dust, the cotton to the red man, and the peasant will have small knob-like seeds, hard as the river-stones, to munch and to crack. There are no stones in Khandesh!

The sun will hit him on the head, the earth maul him by the legs, the red man eat all his soul—and within the black and blue of the ravines, the white venom will flow to the end of time. The trains of the red man rush towards the city.

Finding none of his usual friends in the ravine—the sun was already high over the north-east—Dattopant hastily finished his ablutions and ran back to the village eager to hear about this 'important business'. He passed by Dhondopant's house but his son said he had gone to Kantur to see his second daughter, and her new male child. Then he turned round the Flag-platform, and entered Sonopant's courtyard. His wife was grinding jawari, and the old man was in the byre chopping hay. Dattopant hurried there.

'Hé, brother, what is it all about?'

'Nothing. I think it's about the quarrel between Ramaji and Subbaji. You know about the Corner-stone?'

'But, on my mother's soul, I thought they were going to the court?'

'No, I met the Patel yesterday. He said it would be settled by us. But I didn't know though it would be today.'

'No, brother, I think it's not that!'

'Must be that. If not what else?'

'No, brother, no. I heard an owl hoot on the roof . . . I know it is not that. . . .'

'Then let's ask Govindopant.'

'Well, let us go.'

He left the hay on the flank, and they went across the courtyard to Govindopant's back wall.

'Hé, Govindopant!'

'Hé . . . Hé. . . .'

'What's that tom-tom about, brother?' Govindopant, a tall man, with long, thick whiskers, and hanging cheeks, rose up from behind the wall, his hands soiled with clay. He was plastering the cattle-shed.

'Don't know. Heard the Police Inspector had come on his horse.'

'Police Inspector! Police Inspector!' Dattopant shuddered all over. His Sona, he who is dead, was once tied to a tree and beaten; he hadn't got down from the cart when the Inspector was passing. And Dattopant hated the 'round of hay and honey' for the Inspector's servants. And then the being spat on—and bowings!

'Who told you he's here, brother?'

'Why, the women saw him from the well-side.'

'When, brother?'

'Yesterday evening. Your daughter-in-law too was there.'

'Yesterday?'

'Hé, hé, Father Sonopant, you are here?' There were a number of voices. Bolopant, Vithobopant and Pandopant came through the byre. They were all young and wore short coats in the city fashion. 'The dangerous clique,' the elders used to call them for their subversive talk, and the Patel had more than once warned them against this 'city chatter'.

'The Police Inspector,' cried Pandopant, as though with real satisfaction. 'The Police Inspector, Father Sonopant.'

'What's he here for, son of your father?'

'To arrest us no doubt!' and they all laughed. 'But, do you know,' continued Pandopant in a half-jeering, half-excited tone, 'the Maharaja is coming to our village. . . .'

'The Maharaja!' Govindopant had never beheld the Sovereign yet. His father, whose grandfather had seen Raja Sivaji, always described how god-like a maharaja looked.

'Yes, the Maharaja!' assured Vithobopant. 'They say he'll come to our village and even stay for a night. . . .'

'Nonsense! Nonsense!' protested Govindopant. 'Maharajas don't stay in poor huts, young man. My father used to say Raja Sivaji always slept on horse-back. He hated staying with peasant folk. . . .'

'But this Maharaja is different they say. He has stopped his motor car to talk to peasants passing by.' It was Dattopant.

'In Pitthapur Taluka, they said, didn't they, he

went into a peasant hut, "The sun is hot, mother, can you give me a glass of curds?"'

'As witness,' interrupted Pandopant, 'ask the lizard on the wall of the house where the Maharaja. . .'

'Now! now!' said Father Sonopant, who always calmed a malicious tongue. 'You know, my son, I've heard it's true. For example, the other day I went to see Lawyer Pandrung Joshi. His son passed the highest tests of the Government, and wanted a big post. Turban on his head and *nazar* in his hand, straight he went to the Palace. He'll soon be a taluk collector.'

'So you think he'll come? The Maharaja?' said Dattopant. He would offer him curds and mangoes and even a glass of sherbet, such sherbet as no house in the village could offer.

'Of course! Of course, Govindopant!' assured Pandopant.

'Then I'll receive him in my house. . . .'

'I!' said Dattopant.

'I! I!' shouted Vithobopant and Bolopant.

'Well, let us not quarrel about it,' said Sonopant, cooling the discussion. They called him the sage.

'But,' started Dattopant thoughtfully, 'do you think we can ask him anything? I mean any question?' There was always that Sona's death that bothered him. And the Parsi and the Police Inspector.

There was noise in the back verandah. It was the Patel coming to see Govindopant.

'Govindopant! Govindopant!'

'Yes, Patel!' he shouted back, proud the Patel had come to see him first—and in front of everybody too. . . . Maybe the Maharaja would stay with him. Raja Sivaji, his father used to say. . . .

'I want your help, father.'

'Don't you know everything is yours, Patel. The Maharaja. . . .' He folded his hands and looked humbler than ever. Dattopant felt an unutterable hatred growing in his head. *He* would receive the Maharaja. . . .

'Any help from me?' asked Pandopant jauntily, suppressing an amused laugh.

'No, I've come to see Govindopant.'

'Yes, yes, Patel, my house. . . .'

'No, your mare.'

'For the Maharaja! But it is old.'

'My horse is swift as the wind,' cried Pandopant, looking seriously at the Patel, 'and strong as the pipal.' His two companions turned away to laugh, for as everybody knew Pandopant never had any horse.

'Young man, I am speaking to Govindopant,' spat the Patel, looking gloweringly at the young man. 'The Maharaja,' he said, turning to the elders, 'is passing by our village, accompanied by the Representative and Relation of the Most High Majesty—across the Seas . . . Of His Majesty who lives in his country, London. . . .'

'London, oh yes, London,' repeated Pandopant, who after his visit to the city proclaimed his knowledge of everything foreign. The Patel feigned not to hear.

'Yes, His Majesty's Representative—Viceroy, they call him—accompanied by the Maharaja, is passing by the village in the train.'

'They won't stay here then?' interrupted Dattopant, confused.

'No, they'll pass by our village in the train.' Everybody looked at his neighbour disappointed and resentful. Maybe the Maharaja may still. . . .

'They will pass by in the train, and we have to honour them by standing by the railway line and showing how loyal and faithful our villagers are to the Sovereign.'

'Loyal and faithful to the Sovereign,' repeated Govindopant.

'Those who have horses,' continued the Patel, 'will ride them. Those who haven't will stand, a staff in hand. . . .'

'With folded hands? Or should we bow, Patel?' asked Govindopant. He knew how to bow before kings . . . Raja Sivaji. . . .

'Neither fold your hands nor bow, mind you. You will not move the smallest hair on your body as the train passes by. And you will have your backs to the train.'

'Backs to the train!' exclaimed Dattopant. They had already imagined how, wearing the most shining of their apparel, in red and gold and blue, they would bow as the Maharaja peeped out to greet them. They would bow again. And he would smile back in return. Govindopant even saw how

the Maharaja would stop the train, come down, and as the ancient stories go, send him bags and bags of gold. He wouldn't touch the gold, of course, never. He would build a large free caravanserai, and a well and a temple by it.

'Backs to the train,' repeated the Patel. 'You know how some devilish, prostitute-born scoundrels tried to put a bomb beneath the train of the Representative of the Most High across the Seas. . . .'

'Yes, I've heard of it in the city. They said it just missed him.' It was of course Pandopant.

'Will you hold your tongue, young man! One word more and you will go straight to the prison. I have been watching you since you came back from the city. You talk of nothing but of bombs and pistols, and corrupt these young men with all those city-ideas which no man born to his father would ever utter. I tell you this is the last time I give you the warning. Take care.'

'But . . .' blurted Pandopant, suddenly turning humble, 'I only said what I heard in the city. . . .'

'City or no city. I tell you, shut up or I'll ask the Police Inspector to arrest you immediately!'

'Shut up, young fellow!' cried Govindopant.

'Govindopant,' the Patel said, turning to the elders once again, 'you will have your horse, won't you? For every four telegraph poles there will be one man on foot, and for every four men on foot there will be a man on horse-back.'

'Always your slave!' cried Govindopant, proud.

'Patel,' said Dattopant eagerly, 'shall I stand on

my field by the bael tree?' He would show the Maharaja *his* fields.

'That's in the hands of the Police Inspector. This afternoon he'll decide about it.'

'But—but you'll put in a word for me, Patel?'

'We'll see . . . Anyway,' concluded the Patel, turning round to go home, 'you'll all assemble at my house this afternoon. But, Pandopant, I warn you once again: Hold your tongue, or you'll see I was not put into the world for nothing!' Govindopant, Sonopant and Dattopant turned to the young man with looks severe and full of admonition. Yes, he would have to change.

That evening the whole village was merry. 'Tom-tom . . . Tom-tom . . . Tira-tira . . . Tira-tira . . . Tom-tom . . . Tom-tom . . . To-morrow at cock-crow everybody will be ready by the railway line . . . Everybody . . . At cock-crow. . . . Tom-tom. . . Tom-tom . . . Tira-tira . . . Tira-tira . . . Tom-tom . . . Tom-tom. . . .'

In Khandesh the earth floats. Heaving and quivering, rising and shrivelling, the earth floats in a flood of heat. Men don't walk in Khandesh. They swirl round and round upon their feet—and move forward. Birds don't fly in Khandesh. They are carried on the billows of heat. Horses don't move in Khandesh. The earth moves to them.

Trees indeed do grow in Khandesh. But they stand shaven and sombre like widows before their

husbands' pyre. Now and again they creak their branches—a groan, an oath, a gasp. Men don't speak in Khandesh either. They blubber in their dreams. Trains do rush through Khandesh—clutter-clutter . . . clutter-clutter . . . they squeak and snort and disappear for fear they should fly. The long, black, quavering railway lines submit to them like a cat to its mate. There he comes . . . There . . . he comes . . . the monster . . . Bigger and bigger he swells as he rises up. He shakes and rattles and grits past you. . . .

Trains on trains grind through Khandesh. Trains with spitting men, vomiting women and yelling children. Trains on trains—clutter-clutter, clutter-clutter—with horses and buffaloes, coal, manure, rice, cotton, wheat, pungent-smelling oranges, melting moon-guavas, and juicy, perfumed, voluptuous mangoes. Trains on trains pass by . . . day after day . . . day after day. . . . They pass through Khandesh.

Dattopant and Sonopant and Govindopant—with coats in velvet and gold, with turbans in red and green and blue, dhotis brown as the skin, slippers with sinuous filigree-tails, tassels, kerchiefs, kummerbunds—stand by to see the trains pass by.

Men and horses, coal and cotton pass through Khandesh.

It is a wet, sultry morning. The sun is already high, and the air is spongy. The railway line leaps from the maw of heaven, bumps over the hillocks,

girdles the mounds, and flinging over the depths of the ravines, hisses up, twisting its tail, flopping its head, distraught, and shooting into the gullet of the horizon is lost. Sonopant has been up long. Folding his bedding he lighted his hookah and sat waiting for Dattopant to turn up as usual. When he had smoked and dozed, and dozed again, he rose and bawled across the railway line: 'Hé, brother, hé! Wake up and let's go to the ravine.' 'Hé! Wait fellow! Coming. . . .' Dattopant rose up with an oath, and throwing his blanket by his turban, coat and kummerbund, he left his telegraph-pole and walked up to Sonopant on the other side of the line. The air was suffocating, and a storm seemed to gather somewhere across the rain of heat. The stones beneath his feet were already scorching. Far off the village rose with its mud walls brown as parched flesh. On the flag-staff a crow sat and caw-cawed. Somebody was walking down the twist of the ravine, an ass behind him. His shadow is black as congealed blood. He descends into the ravine. The ass too descends into the ravine. Whirlpools of sunshine play over them.

'Hot!' cried Sonopant, covering his head with his blanket, 'very hot, brother.'

'Ho! Blazing like a frying-pan.'

'Let's go to the ravine, then!'

'When the women come, better send them for some water. It's my young daughter-in-law who comes this morning.'

'No, brother, I'll go. . . .'

'Stay on, brother, don't worry. That wench does nothing at home. Have to keep the women fit—like horses. Must break them!'

'There comes Govindopant,' cried Sonopant, seeing him come up the ravine on his horse. 'There he is. Earlier than both of us too.'

'He says he cannot sleep. He hears noises of trains at every beat of the pulse. . . . I too, brother.'

'I too, brother. Last night what do you think happened? I thought I heard a train. I dressed myself up and said, this is surely the train of the Maharaja, for, I heard the Patel say, they may pass by at night.'

'At night! No, brother. We wouldn't be here if they passed by at night.'

'Of course not. Maybe . . . I don't know. . . .' Sonopant was perplexed.

'Anyway, I dreamt it was the train. Far off I saw a light moving. It was coming . . . coming . . . coming. . . . I heard it sniff and cough and jog. Then I put my ear to the ground. Train! no train. . . . It was only a star hanging between the leaves of the tree.'

'But look here, brother. Wake me up, brother, if there is a train. A whistle there, and you shout, "Hé! you buffalo . . . the train . . . the train. . . ." Yes, brother! And if I do not answer send a stone straight at my head. . . . If the Maharaja. . . .'

Govindopant joined them after tying the horse to

his telegraph-pole. Their women usually brought food together—unless they quarrelled on the way.

'Sit down, brother,' said Dattopant, 'and tell us if you know when the Maharaja comes.'

'Oh, I don't know. I cannot sleep till I've seen the Maharaja. If he does not come I'll go to Kamalpur, and ask for an audience. Raja Sivaji always gave audience to every subject that asked for it.' Dattopant looked at him, burning with jealousy. As though he couldn't go to Kamalpur too, and ask for not one audience but a thousand. There was that affair about Sona's death. And the Parsi and the Police Inspector.

At last the women arrived. They had a bell-metal pot in each hand, containing jowari bread and a chilli or two and salt. Dattopant's last daughter-in-law was shy. Besides, since she lost her husband—of cholera or police injuries, she did not know, nor anybody either—she hardly ever opened her mouth. She put the food before Dattopant and hid herself behind a tree. The two other women—Sonopant's old wife, and Govindopant's elder daughter—were still a few yards away.

'Hé, daughter! Go and fetch some water from the ravine,' cried Dattopant. The daughter-in-law came back, and stood respectfully in front of him.

'Some water, woman, some water to gargle our mouths with!'

'The vessel?'

'Oh, put the food on a cloth, and get it in the

pot. . . . Quick. . . . But how is your yelling-one now?'

'It still coughs.'

'To the monster with your coughs and convulsions. Always the same! women . . . women. . . .'

Meanwhile the daughter-in-law slowly bent down, put the bread and chillies on Sonopant's folded bedding, and went to bring the water. The two other women arrived, and placing the vessels in front of the men, retired behind the tree to have a nap. They say, when men chatter, women sleep, when women quarrel, men snore!

Very soon the water for washing was there, and splashing their faces with it, Sonopant and Dattopant joined Govindopant who had already begun to munch his bread.

'Hé, brother?' said Dattopant between two mouthfuls, 'is it true the Police Inspector arrested Pandopant and Vithobopant? They say he came on inspection. Found them talking together on the railway line. "Dangerous people. . . Dangerous people . . ." he cried and arrested them. They deserved it too—these young braggarts with their city-talk. . . .'

'Don't know. Maybe it's true. Maybe not. My woman said the Patel told everybody about it.'

'That's probably to frighten others,' remarked Sonopant, wiser than the rest.

'If you give the mean fellow a rope for his horse he'll put it round his neighbour's neck! That's the Patel!' concluded Dattopant, resentfully.

'But, brother,' put in Govindopant, 'it's late, brother. And the morning train will soon pass by. The Police Inspector. . . .'

'Well, brother. But let me eat?'

'Yes, eat on. But, mind you. . . .'

'The morning train comes up only when the shadow is on the line, brother. It has hardly touched the stones.'

'Oh, yes! But, brother, hurry on. Anyway. . . .'

Then the three went on tearing and munching the bread. The women sat leaning against each other. It was too hot to be lying on the earth. The monsoon would break out soon—and one would open one's mouth.

All of a sudden a whirlwind rose over the fields. It seemed as though the earth vomited, spurting and flooding to the very skies. Round and swift it swept, brushed over the sands, swirled over the trees, and rushed into the air—and fell with a groaning, rasping cough. The stones on the railway lines glittered hot and bitter. Their glitter seemed the glitter of fangs. The clouds began to heap up. They roared. They grunted. And thunder shot against thunder. Then all of a sudden there was a commotion in the heavens, and lightning flew across the air, splitting a tree. The tree caught fire and burst into flame. The flame of sunshine danced with the flame of lightning. . . . And rain pelted against the earth.

Dattopant and Sonopant and Govindopant sheltered themselves beneath a tree. They lighted their

hookahs and puffed away. The air was filled with crackling noises. And the earth pulsed.

Suddenly there was a cry of something strange. 'It is the horse,' said Govindopant. 'No, it is the women,' insisted Dattopant. It was a strange noise indeed. Between the two swishes of rain the noise squeaked. 'The train!' said Sonopant. 'No, brother, not yet time,' replied Dattopant. 'Perhaps it's the thunder,' put in Govindopant. 'No, brother, it's the train,' repeated Sonopant. And a thunder ground through the heavens hushing his breath across the sheets of rain. 'The train, surely, listen!' cried Sonopant, trying to gather his velvet coat and turban. Dattopant put his ear to the ground. Another thunder boomed in the air and rushed through the entrails of the earth. 'The lightning, brother. The lightning!' he explained with conviction. He didn't want to get soaked in the rain. Besides, one couldn't see. . . .

Clutter-clutter . . . Clutter-clutter. . . . There was a distinct noise. 'The train! The train!' cried Govindopant, and ran towards his horse.

Clutter-clutter . . . Clutter-clutter. . . . 'The train! The train!' shrieked Dattopant and plunged into the storm.

Curtains follow curtains. It is like a prison-house —the storm. Walls of curtain that tear with a breath. . . . Curtain again. . . . Then suddenly the trees. . . . Like policemen. . . . Hard, gory, smeared with black blood. Clutter-clutter . . . Clutter-clutter. . . . Like a leopard the rain scratches on

the back, brusque, roaring, satisfied. . . . Puddles soft as goat's flesh, but sticky and dogged. Then the eruption of lightning—a whole world of trembling glory. Curtains again . . . curtains . . . curtains. . . . To tear them, smite them, grapple them. Clutter-clutter . . . Clutter-clutter . . . Clutter-clutter. . . . His telegraph pole. . . . His coat. . . . His turban. . . . Tassel, kerchief, kummerbund. . . . Clutter-clutter . . . Clutter. . . . Pandopant and Vithobopant in prison. . . . The Police Inspector, fat, bearded. Whipping. . . . Blood. Prison. . . . Iron bars. . . . Sheets and sheets of rain. Curtain on curtain. . . . Go across. . . . Police Inspector. . . . Clutter-clutter . . . Clutter-clutter . . . Clutter-clutter . . . Clutter. . . . There—the train!

Dattopant jumped forward and the train squashed him with a thud.

It was a ballast train. The Viceroy's special followed it. Special trains like kings need heralds. Life is not bought at the market.

Govindopant did see the Maharaja. He was god-like—like Raja Sivaji.

That afternoon the tamté-drum led the funeral. Tira-tira . . . Tira-tira . . . Tom-tom . . . Tom-tom . . . Tira-tira . . . Tira-tira . . . Tom-tom . . . Tom-tom. . . . And the fire consumed the body. In Khandesh the fire burns as elsewhere.

COMPANIONS

Alas till now I did not know
My guide and Fate's guide are one—Hafiz

IT was a serpent such as one sees only at a fair, long and many-coloured and swift in riposte when the juggler stops his music. But it had a secret of its own which none knew except Moti Khan who brought him to the Fatehpur Sunday fair. The secret was: his fangs would lie without venom till the day Moti Khan should see the vision of the large white rupee, with the Kutub Minar on the one side and the face of the Emperor on the other. That day the fang would eat into his flesh and Moti Khan would only be a corpse of a man. Unless he find God.

For to tell you the truth, Moti Khan had caught him in the strangest of strange circumstances. He was one day going through the *sitaphul* wood of Rampur on a visit to his sister, and the day being hot and the sands all scorching and shiny, he lay down under a wild fig-tree, his turban on his face and his legs stretched across a stone. Sleep came like a swift descent of dusk, and after the rapid visions of palms and hills and the dizzying sunshine, he saw a curious thing. A serpent came in the form of a man, opened its mouth, and through the most queer twistings of his face, declared he was Pandit Srinath Sastri of Totépur, who having lived at the foot of the Goddess

Lakshamma for a generation or more, one day in the ecstacy of his vision, he saw her, the benign Goddess straight and supple, offering him two boons. He thought of his falling house and his mortgaged ancestral lands and said, without a thought, 'A bagful of gold and liberation from the cycle of birth and death'. 'And gold you shall have,' said the Goddess, 'but for your greed, you shall be born a serpent in your next life before reaching liberation. For gold and wisdom go in life like soap and oil. Go and be born a juggler's serpent. And when you have made the hearts of many men glad with the ripple and swing of your shining flesh, and you have gone like a bird amidst shrieking children, only to swing round their legs and to swing out to the amusement of them all, when you have climbed old men's shoulders and hung down them chattering like a squirrel, when you have thrust your hood at the virgin and circled round the marrying couples; when you have gone through the dreams of pregnant women and led the seekers to the top of the Mount of Holy Beacon, then your sins will be worn out like the quern with man's grindings and your flesh will catch fire like the will-o'-the-wisp and disappear into the world of darkness where men await the birth to come. The juggler will be a basket-maker and Moti Khan is his name. In a former life he sought God but in this he sits on the lap of a concubine. Wending his way to his sister's for the birth of her son, he will sleep in the *sitaphul* woods. Speak to him. And he will be

the vehicle of your salvation.' Thus spake the Goddess.

'Now, what do you say to that, Moti Khan?'

'Yes, I've been a sinner. But never thought I, God and Satan would become one. Who are you?'

'The very same serpent.'

'Your race has caused the fall of Adam.'

'I sat at the feet of Sri Lakshamma and fell into ecstacy. I am a Brahmin.'

'You are strange.'

'Take me or I'll haunt you for this life and all lives to come.'

'Go, Satan!' shouted Moti Khan, and rising swift as a sword he started for his sister's house. He said to himself, 'I will think of my sister and her child. I will think only of them'. But leaves rustled and serpents came forth from the left and the right, blue ones and white ones and red ones and copper-coloured ones, long ones with short tails and short ones with bent tails, and serpents dropped from tree-tops and rock-edges, serpents hissed on the river sands. Then Moti Khan stood by the Rampur stream and said, 'Wretch! Stop it. Come, I'll take you with me.' Then the serpents disappeared and so did the hissings, and hardly home, he took a basket and put it in a corner, and then he slept; and when he woke, a serpent had curled itself in the basket. Moti Khan had a *pungi* made by the local carpenter, and, putting his mouth to it, he made the serpent dance. All the village gathered round him and all the

animals gathered round him, for the music of Moti Khan was blue, and the serpent danced on his tail.

When he said good-bye to his sister, he did not take the road to his concubine but went straight northwards, for Allah called him there. And at every village men came to offer food to Moti Khan and women came to offer milk to the serpent, for it swung round children's legs and swung out, and cured them of all scars and poxes and fevers. Old men slept better after its touch and women conceived on the very night they offered milk to it. Plague went and plenty came, but Moti Khan would not smell silver. That would be death.

Now sometimes, at night in caravanserais, they had wrangles.

Moti Khan used to say: 'You are not even a woman to put under oneself.'

'But so many women come to see you and so many men come to honour you, and only a king could have had such a reception, though you're only a basket-maker.'

'Only a basket-maker! But I had a queen of a woman, and when she sang her voice was all flesh, and her flesh was all song. And she chewed betel-leaves and her lips were red, and even kings. . . .'

'Stop that. Between this and the vision of the rupee. . . .'

Moti Khan pulled at his beard and, fire in his eyes, he broke his knuckles against the earth.

'If only I could see a woman!'

'If you want God forget women, Moti Khan.'

'But I never asked for God. It is you who always bore me with God. I said I loved a woman. You are only a fanged beast. And here I am in the prime of life with a reptile to live with.'

But suddenly temple bells rang, and the muezzin was heard to cry Allahu-Akbar. No doubt it was all the serpent's work. Trembling, Moti Khan fell on his knees and bent himself in prayer.

From that day on the serpent had one eye turned to the right and one to the left when it danced. Once it looked at the men and once at the women, and suddenly it used to hiss up and slap Moti Khan's cheeks with the back of its head, for his music had fallen false and he was eyeing women. Round were their hips, he would think, and the eyelashes are black and blue, and the breasts are pointed like young mangoes, and their limbs so tremble and flow that he could sweetly melt into them.

One day, however, there was at the market a dark blue woman, with red lips, young and sprightly; and she was a butter woman. She came and stood by Moti Khan as he made the serpent dance. He played and he played on his bamboo *pungi* and music swung here and splashed there, and suddenly he looked at her and her eyes and her breasts and the *naga-swara* went and became *moha-swara*, and she felt it and he felt she felt it; and when night came, he thought and thought so much of

her and she thought and thought so much of him, that he slipped to the serai door and she came to the serai gate, flower in her hair and perfume on her limbs, but lo! like the sword of God came a long, rippling light, circled round them, pinched at her nipples and flew back into the bewildering night. She cried out, and the whole town waked, and Moti Khan thrust the basket under his arm and walked northwards, for Allah called him thither.

'Now,' said Moti Khan, 'I have to find God. Else this creature will kill me. And the Devil knows the hell I'd have to bake in.' So he decided that, at the next saint's tomb he encountered, he would sit down and meditate. But he wandered and he wandered; from one village he went to another, from one fair he went to another, but he found no dargah to meditate by. For God always called him northwards and northwards, and he crossed the jungles and he went up the mountains, and he came upon narrow valleys where birds screeched here and deer frisked there but no man's voice was to be heard, and he said, 'Now let me turn back home'; but he looked back and he was afraid. And he said, 'Now I have to go to the North, for Allah calls me there'. And he climbed mountains again, and ran through jungles, and then came broad plains, and he went to the fairs and made the snake dance, and people left their rice shops and cotton-ware shops and the bellowing cattle and the yoked threshers and the querns and the kilns, and came to hear him

play the music and to see the snake dance. They gave him food and fruit and cloth, but when they said, 'Here's a coin,' he said 'Nay'. And the snake was right glad of it, for he hated to kill Moti Khan till he had found God, and he himself hated to die. Now, when Moti Khan had crossed the Narbuda and the Pervan and the Bhagirath, he came to the Jumna, and through long Agra he passed making the snake dance, and yet he could not find God and he was sore in soul with it. And the serpent was bothersome.

But at Fatehpur Sikri, he said, 'Here is Sheikh Chisti's tomb and I would rather starve and die than go one thumb-length more'. He sat by Sheikh Chisti's tomb and he said, 'Sheikh Chisti, what is this Fate has sent me? This serpent is a very wicked thing. He just hisses and spits fire at every wink and waver. He says, "Find God". Now, tell me, Sheikh Chisti, how can I find Him? Till I find Him I will not leave this place.'

But even as he prayed he saw snakes sprout through his head, fountains splashed and snakes fell gently to the sides like the waters by the Taj, and through them came women, soft women, dancing women, round hips, betel-chewed lips, round breasts, —shy some were, while some were only minxes—and they came from the right and went to the left, and they pulled at his beard—and, suddenly, white serpents burst through the earth and enveloped them all, but Moti Khan would not move. He

said: 'Sheikh Chisti, I am in a strange world. But there is a darker world I see behind, and beyond that dark, dark world, I see a brighter world, and there, there must be Allah.'

For twenty-nine days he knelt there, his hands pressed against his ears, his face turned towards Sheikh Chisti's tomb. And people came and said, 'Wake up, old man, wake up'; but he would not answer. And when they found the snake lying on the tomb of Sheikh Chisti they cried, 'This is a strange thing', and they took to their heels; while others came and brought mullahs and maulvis but Moti Khan would not answer. For, to speak the truth, he was crossing through the dark waters, where one strains and splashes, and where the sky is all cold, and the stars all dead, and till man come to the other shore, there shall be neither peace nor God.

On the twenty-ninth night Sheikh Chisti woke from his tomb and came, his skull-cap and all, and he said: 'My son, what may I give you?'

'Peace from this serpent—and God.'

'My son, God is not to be seen. He is everywhere.'

'Eyes to see God, for I cannot any more go northwards.'

'Eyes to discern God you shall have.'

'Then peace from this serpent.'

'Faithful shall he be, true companion of the God-seeker.'

'Peace to all men and women,' said Moti Khan.

'Peace to all mankind. Further, Moti Khan, I have something to tell you; as dawn breaks Maulvi Mohammed Khan will come to offer you his daughter, fair as an oleander. She has been waiting for you and she will wed you. My blessings on you, my son!'

'Allah is found! Victory to Allah!' cried Moti Khan. The serpent flung round him, slipped between his feet and curled round his neck and danced on his head, for, when Moti Khan found God, his sins would be worn out like the quern-stone with the grindings of man, and there would be peace in all mankind.

Moti Khan married the devout daughter of Maulvi Mohammed Khan and he loved her well, and he settled down in Fatehpur Sikri and became the guardian of Sheikh Chisti's tomb. The serpent lived with him, and now and again he was taken to the fair to play for the children.

One day, however, Moti Khan's wife died and was buried in a tomb of black marble. Eleven months later Moti Khan died and he was given a white marble tomb, and a dome of the same stone, for both. Three days after that the serpent died too, and they buried him in the earth beside the dargah, and gave him a nice clay tomb. A pipal sprang up on it, and a passing Brahmin planted a neem-tree by the pipal, and some merchant in the village gave money to build a platform round them. The pipal rose to the skies and covered the dome with dark, cool shade, and Brahmins planted snake-stones under it, and bells

rang and camphors were lit, and marriage couples went round the platform in circumambulation. When the serpent was offered the camphor Moti Khan had the incense. And when illness comes to the town, with music and flags and torches do we go, and we fall in front of the pipal-platform and we fall prostrate before the dargah, and right through the night a wind rises and blows away the foul humours of the village. And when children cry, you say, 'Moti Khan will cure you, my treasure', and they are cured. Emperors and kings have come and gone but never have they destroyed our village. For man and serpent are friends, and Moti Khan found God.

Between Agra and Fatehpur Sikri you may still find the little tomb and the pipal. Boys have written their names on the walls and dust and leaves cover the gold and blue of the pall. But someone has dug a well by the side, and if thirst takes you on the road, you can take a drink and rest under the pipal, and think deeply of God.

THE COW OF THE BARRICADES

THEY called her Gauri for she came every Tuesday evening before sunset to stand and nibble at the hair of the Master. And the Master touched her and caressed her and he said: 'How are you, Gauri?' and Gauri simply bent her legs and drew back her tongue and, shaking her head, ambled round him and disappeared among the bushes. And till Tuesday next she was not to be seen. And the Master's disciples gathered grain and grass and rice-water to give her every Tuesday, but she refused it all and took only the handful of grain the Master gave. She munched it slowly and carefully as one articulates a string of holy words, and when she had finished eating, she knelt again, shook her head and disappeared. And the Master's disciples said: 'This is a strange creature,' and they went to the Cotton Street and the Mango Street, and they went by the Ginning Mills and through the Weavers' Lines, but Gauri was nowhere to be seen. She was not even a god-dedicated cow, for never had a shop-keeper caught her eating the grams nor was she found huddled in a cattle-pound. People said, 'Only the Master could have such strange visitors,' and they went to the Master and said: 'Master, can you tell us who this cow may be?' And the Master smiled with unquenchable love

and fun and he said: 'She may be my baton-armed mother-in-law.' Though she may be the mother of one of you. Perhaps she is the great Mother's vehicle.' And like to a mother, they put kunkum on her forehead and till Tuesday next they waited for Gauri.

But people heard of it here and people heard of it there, and they came with grain and hay and kunkum water saying, 'We have a strange visitor, let us honour her'. And merchants came saying, 'Maybe she's Lakshmi, the Goddess, and we may make more money next harvest', and fell at her feet. And students came to touch her head and touch her tail, saying, 'Let me pass the examinations this year!' And young girls came to ask for husbands and widows to ask for purity, and the childless to ask for children. And so every Tuesday there was a veritable procession of people at the Master's hermitage. But Gauri would pass by them all like a holy wife among men, and going straight to the Master, would nibble at his hair and disappear among the bushes. People unable to take back the untouched offerings gave them to the river and the fishes jumped to eat them as at a festival; but the crocodile had disappeared from the whirls of the deep waters. And one fine morning the Master woke in his bed to hear the snake and the rat playing under him, for when the seeker finds harmony, the jackal and the deer and the rat and the serpent become friends. And Gauri was no doubt a fervent soul who had sought the paths of this world to be born a sage in the next, for she was so compassionate and true.

There was only one other person whose hair she had nibbled—she had nibbled at the hair of the Mahatma. For the Mahatma loved all creatures, the speechful and mute.

Now at this time the Mahatma's men were fighting in the country against the red men's Government. The Mahatma said: 'Don't buy their cloth.' And people did not buy their cloth. The Mahatma said: 'Don't serve under them.' And people did not serve under them.' And the Mahatma said: 'Don't pay their taxes.' And people did not pay the taxes. And people gathered, and bonfires were lit and processions were formed, and there were many men wounded and killed and many taken to prisons, but people would not pay taxes nor would they wear foreign clothes. And soldiers came from the cities, big men, and bearded men, with large rifles, and they said to some, 'You shall not leave the house after sunset'; and to some, 'You shall not ride a bicycle'; and to yet others, 'You shall not go out of the district'. And children carried blue cards when they were good, blue and red when they were a little wicked, and red when they were very wicked. And women could not go to the temples and marriages, and men could not go to the riverside to ease themselves in the morning. Life became intolerable and people moaned and groaned, but the red man's Government would rule the country, happen what may, and make men pay more and more taxes.

Then the men in the mills and factories said, 'We are with you, brothers', and the women said, 'We are with you, sisters', and the whole town became a battle-ground. For, when the soldiers had passed through the streets, the workers of the mills builded barricade after barricade. With stones and bamboos and bedsteads and carts and mill-stones and granary-baskets they built barricades, and the soldiers could not pass again. The Master came and said: 'No barricades in the name of the Mahatma, for much blood will be spilt,' but the workmen said, 'It is not with, "I love you, I love you," you can change the grinding heart of this Government.' And they built more and more barricades and put themselves behind these, and one day they were the masters of the town.

But the red man's Government was no fool's government. It sent for men from Peshawar and Pindi, while heavy cars were stationed at the City Gates, with guns to the left and guns to the right, and soldiers stood beside them, for the town would be taken, and cost what it might the red man's Government would govern.

And, though Gauri had neither the blue card nor the red card she now came every evening to the Master; she looked very sad, and somebody had even seen a tear, clear as a drop of the Ganges, run down her cheeks, for she was of compassion infinite and true.

And people were much affrighted, and they took the women and the children to the fields beyond and

they cooked food beneath the trees and lived there—for the army of the Government was going to take the town and no woman or child would be spared. And doors were closed and clothes and vessels and jewels were hidden away, and only the workmen and the men ruled the city, and the Master was the head of them all, and they called him President. Patrols of young men in khadi and Gandhi-cap would go through the streets, and when they saw the old or the miserly peeping from behind the doors they called them and talked to them and led them to the camp by the fields, for the Master said there was danger and nobody could stay but the strong and the young. Grass grew beneath the eaves and dust of monsoon swept along the streets while the red men's trains brought armies after armies, and everybody could see them for the station was down below and the town upon a hill. Barricades lay on the streets like corpse-heaps after the last plague, but the biggest of them all was in the Suryanarayana Street. It was as big as a chariot.

Men were hid behind it and waited for the battle. But the Master said, 'No, there shall be no battle, brothers'. But the workmen said again, 'It is not with, "I love you, I love you," that you can change the grinding heart of this Government,' and they brought picks and scythes and crowbars, and a few Mohammedans brought their swords and one or two stole rifles from the mansions, and there was a regular fighting army ready to fall on the red man's

men. And the Master went and said this and the Master went and said that, but the workmen said, 'We'll fight', and fight they would. So deep in despair the Master said, 'I resign from the Presidentship', and he went and sat in meditation and rose into the worlds from which come light and love, in order that the city might be saved from bloodshed. And when people heard this they were greatly angered against the workmen, but they knew the workmen were right and the Master was right, and they did not know which way the eye should turn. Owls hovered about even in midday light, and when dusk fell, all the stars hung so low that people knew that that night would see the fight.

But everybody looked at the empty street-corners and said, 'Where is she—Gauri?'

At ten that night the first war-chariots were heard to move up, and cannons and bayonets and lifted swords rushed in assault.

And what happened afterwards people remember to this very day. There she was, Gauri, striding out of the Oil Lane and turning round Copper Seenayya's house towards the Suryanarayana Street, her head held gently bent and her ears pressed back like plaits of hair, and staggering like one going to the temple with fruits and flowers to offer to the Goddess. And she walked fast, fast, and when people saw her they ran behind her, and crowds after crowds gathered round her and torch and lantern in hand

they marched through the Brahmin Street and the Cotton Street and past the Venkatalakshamma Well, and the nearer she came to the barricades the faster she walked, though she never ran. And people said, 'She will protect us. Now it's sure she will save us', and bells were brought and rung and camphors were lit and coconuts were broken at her feet, but she neither shuddered nor did she move her head; she walked on. And the workmen who were behind the barricades, they saw this and they were sore-furious with it, and they said, 'Here, they send the cow instead of coming to help us'. Some swore and others laughed, and one of them said, 'We'll fire at her, for if the crowd is here and the red man's army on the other side it will be terrible'. But they were afraid, for the crowd chanted 'Vandé Mataram', and they were all uplifted and sure, and Gauri marched onwards her eyes raised towards the barricades. And as she came near the Temple-square the workmen lay down their arms, as she came by the Tulsi Well they folded their hands, and as she was beneath the barricades they fell prostrate at her feet murmuring, 'Goddess, who may you be?' And they formed two rings, and between them passed Gauri, her left foreleg first, then her back right leg, once on the sand-bag, once on the cart-wheel, and with the third move men pushed her up and she was on the top of the barricades. And then came a rich whispering like a crowd at evening worship, but the red men's army cried from the other side of the

barricades, 'Oh, what's this? Oh, what's this?' and they rushed towards the barricades thinking it was a flag of truce. But when they saw the cow and its looks and the tear, clear as a drop of the Ganges, they shouted out, 'Victory to the Mahatma! Mahatma Gandhi ki jai!' and joined up with the crowd. But their chief, the red man, saw this and fired a shot. It went through Gauri's head, and she fell a vehicle of God among lowly men.

But they said blood did not gush out of the head but only between the forelegs, from the thickness of her breast.

Peace has come back to us now. Seth Jamnalal Dwarak Chand bought the two houses on either side of the barricades, cut a loop road through them, and in the middle he erected a metal statue for Gauri. Our Gauri was not so tall nor was she so stiff, for she had a very human look. But we all offer her flowers and honey and perfumed sweetmeats and the first green grass of spring. And our children jump over the railings and play between her legs, and, putting their mouths to the hole in the breast—for this was made too—shout out resounding booms. And never have our carpenters had gayer times than since Gauri died, for our children do not want their baswanna-bulls but only ask for Gauris. And to this day hawkers cry them about at the railway station, chanting, 'Gauris of Gorakhpur! Polished, varnished and on four wheels!' and many a child

from the far Himalayas to the seas of the South pulls them through the dusty streets of Hindusthan.

But even now when we light our sanctum lights at night, we say, 'Where is she, Gauri?' Only the Master knows where she is. He says: 'Gauri is waiting in the Middle Heavens to be born. She will be reborn when India sorrows again before She is free.'

Therefore it is said, 'The Mahatma may be all wrong about politics, but he is right about the fulness of love in all creatures—the speechful and the mute'.